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《廢墟臺灣》和《零地點》的書寫危機

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摘　要

如果寫實小說無可避免地掩蓋了它所欲呈現的真相，那麼它是否能達成其所要批判的目的？我藉由精讀宋澤萊的《廢墟臺灣》和伊格言的《零地點》來思索這個問題。我首先透過基本符號學來解釋輻射和核能小說並以不同閱讀典範來解釋後現代書寫危機。接著經由日記小說特徵，核子物理規模及創傷後壓力症候群來探討兩本小說的時間敘述結構。最後討論小說對大眾媒體及原子的話語書寫，並連結到文章開頭提及的符號學及閱讀典範。在每一個階段的研究，我將這兩本小說與文學評論，歷史人類學，報導文學及抗議文學相提並論。論文總結發現儘管存在著後現代的書寫危機，寫實小說仍具有批判的功能。在這兩本小說裡，它清楚指出了貪污，媒體操控及核能發展的危險。

關鍵詞：《廢墟臺灣》、《零地點》、宋澤萊、伊格言、核能發電

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The Crises of Representation in *Taiwan in Ruins* and *Ground Zero*

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Abstract

If realistic fiction inevitably obliterates the truth it seeks to represent, can it undermine the object of its critique? I consider this question by reading closely *Taiwan in Ruins* by Song Zelai and *Ground Zero* by Yi Geyan. I begin by introducing radiation and nuclear fiction with semiotics and reading paradigms with the postmodern crisis of representation. Thereafter I consider the temporal narrative structure of each novel with the conventions of diary fiction, the scales of nuclear physics, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Finally, I discuss representations of mass media and atomic discourse and link them to the opening notes on semiotics and reading postmodern fiction. In each stage of the study I situate the novels into a constellation of literary criticism, historical anthropology, reportage, and protest literature. To conclude, I suggest that despite the postmodern crisis of representation, realistic fiction seems capable of undermining the object of its critique, which in these novels are the dangers of corruption, media manipulation, and nuclear energy development.

Keywords: *Taiwan in Ruins*, *Ground Zero*, Song Zelai, Yi Geyan, nuclear energy

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Let us begin to explore these two Taiwanese novels containing nuclear catastrophes with a simple, seductive symbol: a dot emitting three arcs (figure 1). Created at the University of California in 1946, the radiation symbol was designed to visually represent activity radiating from an atom.[1] Similarly, the English *image acoustic*, or sound pattern, spelled r-a-d-i-a-t-i-o-n aurally represents the powerful and often dangerous energy emitted by the nuclei of certain isotopes. Yet the word radiation in the first half of the 21st century means far more than simply the emission of waves or sub-atomic particles, because it calls to mind nuclear weapons, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Bikini Atoll, and the Lop Nur basin; the nuclear power plants in or near Harrisburg, Pripyat, Ōkuma, and Gongliao; and the spent fuel repositories located at Onkalo, Carlsbad, and on Lanyu island. Radiation also calls to mind the Japanese *hibakusha* literature of and about victims and survivors of the atomic bombings such as *Black Rain* (1965) by Ibuse Masuji, *Summer Flowers* (1949) by Hara Tamaki, and "Two Grave Markers" (1975) by Hayashi Kyoko. It also reminds us of films about atomic warfare like *Failsafe* (1964), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), or *On the Beach* (1959) as well as nuclear energy and spent waste repository movies such as *The China Syndrome* (1979), *Containment* (2016), *Into Eternity* (2010), and *Gongliao: How are You?* (*Gongliao: nihaoma*) (2004). More to the task at hand, *Taiwan in Ruins* (1985) by Song Zelai, "*Notes of the Fire from the Sky*" (1986) by Zhang Dachun, *Ground Zero* (2013) by Yi Geyan, and *Acheron* (2014) by Ye Chunzhi figure prominently in discussions of fiction and atomic energy in Taiwan.[2]

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[1] Lloyd D. Stephens and Rosemary Barret, "A Brief History of a '20th Century Danger Sign,'" in Ronald L. Kathern and Paul L. Ziemer eds, *Health Physics: A Backward Glance. Thirteen Original Papers on the History of Radiation Protection* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), pp. 95-96.

[2] Song Zelai, Yi Geyan, and Ye Chunzhi are pennames. I refer to all authors by the names found in the cataloging and copyright information pages of the works cited and transliterate using the *hanyu pinyin* system. Original *hanzi,* are placed in the footnotes as needed.

Figure 1

Each chapter of *Acheron*, a forensic narrative that follows two protagonists as they search for a missing graduate student and missing uranium, bears a date stamp and a location. The bulk of *Taiwan in Ruins*, a postapocalyptic, dystopian narrative, is composed of dated journal entries, several of which include reference to mismanagement of nuclear power plants and spent fuel. Half of the twelve pages long "Notes on the Fire from the Sky", a memo that summarizes an 8,056 pages long report of more than 6 million characters, chronicles the hours immediately following a nuclear power plant accident. Finally, like *Acheron,* the chapters of *Ground Zero*, another postapocalyptic, dystopian narrative that is composed of what Hueichu Chu calls two "parallel plot lines", also bear date stamps and locations.[3] Each narrative merits a closer look because each calls to mind questions of contemporaneity and genre; nonetheless, this essay focuses on the works by Song Zelai and Yi Geyan, because both are substantial novels, both describe a Taiwan completely or partially destroyed by radiation, and both seem intended to intervene in nuclear energy politics in Taiwan. Before looking at the novels, however, let us review some basic structural linguistics and postmodern reading strategies, in order to highlight certain unstable excesses of meaning and representation which lie below any close reading. Reading strategies, in fact, be they close, contemporary, postmodern or otherwise, may allow us to both stretch the membranes of genre and contemporaneity and consider anew the efficacy of the two novels as critiques of nuclear politics.

[3] Hueichu Chu, "'After' the Catastrophe: Imagining Nuclear Disaster in Egoyan Zheng's *Ling didian* (*Ground Zero*)," in Chia-ju Chang and Scott Slovic eds., *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 111.

It is all too well known that Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the signified and the signifier together constitute a sign: "the combination of a concept and a sound pattern."[4] With reference to the above texts and films, nuclear decay and its associated meanings form the signified and the sound pattern radiation forms the signifier. Moreover, signs, like radioactive isotopes, are unstable; therefore, in the narratives mentioned above radiation acquires meanings beyond nuclear physics, because the signified is the amalgamation of both physics and any other associated meanings. Such excesses of meaning (e.g. war, atomic accidents) in turn become the signified linked to the sign (radiation) in new systems of meaning (dystopias, foreign relations, protests). In other words, the sign radiation makes the nuclear idiom, or perhaps genre, possible, which in turn makes novels such as *Taiwan in Ruins* and *Ground Zero* possible. It is not necessary here to undertake an exercise in semiotics to explain this concept in greater detail; Roland Barthes famously did so decades ago in *Mythologies.* Nonetheless, keeping these notions in mind makes it easier for us to understand that on a larger scale, such unstable signs and the idioms they constitute contribute to the postmodern crisis of representation, which in a nutshell is simply the fact that unstable signs yield unstable representations. On this 20th century crisis John Welsh suggested, "writers lost faith in the ability of words and symbols to function as reliable vehicles of thought and experience, the act of representation forever lost its innocence."[5]

Almost four decades ago, and coincidentally one year after the publication of *Taiwan in Ruins* in 1986, Teresa Ebert in language similar to de Saussure's suggested a taxonomy for these unstable or unreliable representations: 1. the representational, 2. the significatory, and 3. the post-representational.[6] First, "representational ways of making sense … are based on the belief that the meanings of signs, such as words and images, lies not in the signs themselves but in the objects, ideas, and actions to which they refer …"[7] This seems to describe

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4 Ferdinand de Saussure. *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. (Paris: Payot, 1969), p. 99.

5 John Welsh, "Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation," *Working Papers in Romance Languages* vol. 1, iss. 2 (Summer 2007), Article 2: 1. http://repository.upenn.edu/wproml/vol1/iss2/.

6 Teresa L. Ebert, "The Crisis of Representation in Cultural Studies: Reading Postmodern Texts," *American Quarterly* vol. 38, no. 5 (1986), pp. 894-902.

7 Ibid.

the common but incomplete understanding of the signifier and the signified as simply the sound pattern and the object to which it refers (incomplete because it elides the excess associations of the sign). Ebert's significatory stands in opposition to the representational. For the significatory, "language and other signifying systems are viewed as the material social practices that determine the 'real,' thereby erasing the distinctions between signs (representations) and reality: everything is signification and signification is all we know about reality.[8] Finally, there is the post-representational, which "no longer accepts the relation between representations and their referents in the world outside language as natural and unmediated by sign systems and at the same time does not completely abandon the necessity of 'reference' and of 'real' entities capable of limiting the dispersion and self-referentiality of signifying systems."[9] Of post-representational readings Ebert writes, "[they are] sites in which the contrary ways of reading reality face each other."[10]

But what of the author? After all, a reader needs a writer. For this let us again turn to Welsh.

> "While representation is necessary to share thoughts and experience in the form of comprehensible symbols, these symbols inevitably fail to tell the whole story. Representation contains its own inherent violence in which the desired, necessary meaning (that ineffable 'truth' that it is the ethical writer's duty to express) is inevitably obliterated and replaced by the physical text. The value of this text is at best only partial, and at worst expresses and reinforces the very structures of repression that it is intended to combat. It is one of the great, labyrinthine questions of postmodernity: if writing is inherently violent, is it also inherently immoral? How can the postmodern intellectual circumvent the violence of representation in order to fulfill the moral duty of literature?"[11]

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 896.
10 Ibid.
11 John Welsh, "Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation," p. 1

Welsh explains this crisis of representation faced by writers each time they pick up a pen or place their hands on a keyboard in his meditation on *Invisible Cities* (1972) by Italo Calvino (1923-1985), wherein he considers the text, the author, and their critics. According to one of his critics, Carla Benedetti, "Calvino is a prime representative of a "weakened" postmodernism, focusing narrowly, as he does, on the stylistic dimensions of the work of art and foregoing more ethically responsible engagement with social realities."[12] Whether or not engagement is inversely proportional to stylistics is beyond this essay, but Benedetti, Ebert, Welsh, and radiation itself draw attention to the difficult proposition of reading or writing as an ethical or moral undertaking in a world characterized by excesses of meaning and textual obliteration.

Writing as an ethical or moral undertaking is indeed what both Song Zelai and Yi Geyan seem to be doing. Yi Geyan offers as much in the appendix to the novel, "He explains that he integrates real events and characters into the fictional story to make the novel an example of 'action art,' through which Zheng [Yi] is determined to 'intervene in' the FNPP [fourth nuclear power plant] issue."[13] Without question then his intention is to intervene in the use of nuclear energy in Taiwan. This also seems to be the case with *Taiwan in Ruins* with its framing story of a Taiwan cutoff from the rest of the world and the rapidly clicking Geiger counter of the two scientists who risk visiting Taiwan and discover the journal.[14] Like these novels many of the texts which I reference in the following pages also seek to intervene. As such, if we follow Carolyn Miller's argument that "a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish,"[15] then it seems possible to conceive of an inclusive and engaged nuclear genre that defies traditional praxis. Such a rhetorical scheme goes against the grain of more conventional literary uses of the term. Romances, mysteries, dystopias, and even the diary novel I touch on below are what we usually find when we come upon

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[12] Alessia Ricciardi, "Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity," *MLN* vol. 114, no. 5 (1999): 1062.

[13] Hueichu Chu, "'After' the Catastrophe: Imagining Nuclear Disaster in Egoyan Zheng's *Ling didian (Ground Zero)*," p. 111.

[14] Zelai Song, *Taiwan in Ruins*, p. 28. Unless otherwise noted translations into the English are my own.

[15] Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984), p. 151.

discussion of genre. If not those, then it is often even more basic categories such as poetry, drama, or prose narrative. Notwithstanding such a basic criticism, if genre might be interpreted as a "multidimensional social phenomenon, a structurational nexis between action and structure, between agent and institution, between past and future" as Miller suggests in the 2014 reexamination of her 1984 essay, then perhaps how we categorize narratives both literary and otherwise may also be in crisis.[16]

My title for this essay, "The Crises of Representation", with its combination of a definite article and the plural form is itself an excess of meaning. Which crises of representation and how many are they? In answer I begin with three. First, how can scale be represented? Authors, scientists, and journalists describing nuclear energy must represent dimensions of time from that of fission - less than a millionth of a second - to radioactive waste containment - more than a million years. Because of these facts I suggest the problem of contemporaneity, not only for the two novels published 30 years apart, but also for the planet and human beings (or whatever we become) with regard to spent fuel half-lives. If humanoids stumble onto our radioactive waste stored in Onkalo, Finland or on Lanyu island 100,000 years from now how are they our contemporaries? Second, and similar to the representation of extreme scales, is the representation of trauma: how can the unremembered be represented? When does "it" actually happen, when "it" happened or when we realize that "it" has happened? Finally, the third primary crisis of representation to consider is that of the Taiwanese people. How are the people of Taiwan represented politically and who produces and consumes such mediations? It is perhaps this crisis that both Song Zelai and Yi Geyan depict most vividly. I below highlight and offer meditations on these questions in the fictional Taiwan found in these two novels with close readings of the texts in tandem with associated realities and significations from other texts of the nuclear genre, in order to generate still more questions on contemporaneous scales, atomic discourse or genre, representation, and Taiwan.

[16] Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)," *Letras & Letras* 31, no. 3 (2015), p. 69.

Iterative Representation

Taiwan in Ruins by Song Zelai is almost exclusively the written journal left behind by Li Xinfu, a videographer who commits suicide in a dystopian Taiwan of the (then) future. It is a Taiwan undone by social, political, and environmental decay. Much of the destruction of the environment stems from atomic accidents including leaks from nuclear power plants and poor management of radioactive waste. Li chooses to write even though he has access to a medium that seems more powerful than the written word. If nothing else, the audio component of video recordings provides direct access to the sound patterns of Taiwanese who are not native speakers of Mandarin Chinese, yet Li chooses the pen. Perhaps he makes this decision because each day as a government filmmaker he produces a system of signs that has little or no connection with the reality of Taiwan. It seems that he writes in an effort to claim the world of Ebert's representational readers while at the same time he professionally creates a world where there is nothing other than signification.

Beginning with the sputtering, distorted image of a news anchor, and in the very next chapter moving on to dream image capture, *Ground Zero* by Yi Geyan is a nonlinear, episodic account of events in the life of Lin Qunhao, an engineer at the Gongliao Nuclear Power Plant, during the months and years leading up to and after a catastrophic accident that leaves most of northern Taiwan a nuclear exclusion zone not unlike the perimeters now surrounding Chernobyl and Fukushima. Moreover, visualizations sustain the narrative thematically and formalistically. Among other instances, an image captured from a dream leads to the murder of Lin and his attending physician. The reality of *Ground Zero* is perhaps a representational obverse of Ebert's significatory, because the actions to which words and images refer to stem not from the actions themselves but instead from the words and actions that refer to them. In effect reality is driven by its representation: the significatory begets the reality of the representational.

Dystopian realism nonetheless describes both narratives, and they do seem to belong to the genre. In particular they stress one feature of reality: time. Moreover, time, or rather temporal proximity to the reader perhaps leads to the disquiet produced by both texts. Unlike utopian novels set far away in the future,

fear and despair in dystopian texts arise from their nearness to the present according to Chen Jianzhong.[17] In addition to the importance of the moment of the narrative, both novels also underscore the importance of the moment of narration. *Taiwan in Ruins* is a diary novel, a genre defined by Lorna Martens as "a fictional prose narrative written from day to day by a single first-person narrator who does not address himself to a fictive addressee or recipient."[18] The diary novel may lack a reader but it "emphasizes the time of writing rather than the time that is written about. The progressive sequence of dates on which the diarist writes gives the narrative its temporal continuity."[19] She adds, "This present-tense progression tends to dominate the subject matter, so that the diarist usually writes about events of the immediate past–events that occur between one entry and the next–or records his momentary ideas, reflections, or emotions."[20]

Taiwan in Ruins is Li Xinfu's 2010 diary that is discovered by two foreign scientists, Albert and Paul, shortly after they arrive on the shores of Taiwan in March 2015; during the intervening years the island has suffered an environmental catastrophe. Yet details of the catastrophe are unclear, because in 2005 the island cutoff all communication with the outside world. Li's diary does in fact progress in temporal continuity adhering to genre conventions, but his entries are limited to months. The dates are left blank, which leads to one of the many temporal vacuums found in *Taiwan in Ruins* (the five years gap between Li's final entry and the arrival of scientists is another). Li's five years old diary per Marten's thinking should have been written only for himself, but in the first entry of the journal dated simply "February," he suggests another reader.

> I don't know why, but I find I want to jot down these odds and ends. And it seems I must tell some people about what's about to happen. Of course, this might have something to do with how much I value my own life and experiences. Of course, I'm no one important – only a reporter – maybe it's because I'm a reporter, it's a professional habit that I naturally

[17] Jianzhong Chen, Toward a Radical Love: *A Study of Zelai Song's Novels* (Taichung: Morningstar, 2007), p. 154.
[18] Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 4.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., p. 5.

> want to report on everything, and so I write this disjointed journal. Maybe. But I can't be sure.[21]

In a thematically similar vein, during the first few chapters of *Ground Zero* it soon becomes clear that someone is, or some people are, interested in finding out something from Lin Qunhao. Indeed, suffering from memory loss following the accident at Gongliao, Lin himself is looking for something. After an elliptical prologue and an enigmatic chapter zero, the reader learns that Lin Qunhao is being held in a special medical center in Tainan that processes victims of an accident at the Gongliao Nuclear Power Plant. His detainment calls to mind the medical surveillance system that was established for the Fukushima 50; the employees of the Tokyo Electric Power Company who struggled to contain the aftermath of the 3 March 2011 nuclear disaster.[22] Yet Lin is not only being kept in the medical center to treat radiation sickness, new technology is being used to capture images from his dreams in the hope of gaining information about the accident. He knows something, so he is detained. To be more specific, he has seen something which he cannot consciously recall: the appearance of a powerful presidential candidate in the control room of the Gongliao Nuclear Power Plant.

Eventually an image of the candidate appears in a computer-generated representation of Lin's dream and is printed out by the physician searching his mind, Li Liqing. But shortly thereafter the image disappears from the computer and Li is denied access to the dream imaging technology. This episode, indeed, the entire novel, is related through a third person narrator, but it is not an omniscient narrator. The narrator, and consequently the reader as well, is constrained by the circumstances and events associated with the Gongliao disaster: disorienting intimacy and contemporaneity.

Ground Zero may not be a diary novel, but it is punctuated with dates and times; in fact, exactly when and where the action is taking place is much clearer in *Ground Zero* than it is in *Taiwan in Ruins*. Each chapter begins with a date, a location, and an explanation of either how many days before or after the nuclear accident and often times how many days before a special election is to take place.

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[21] Zelai Song, *Taiwan in Ruins*, p. 45.

[22] Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), p. xxiii.

But unlike the diary in which events occur in chronological order, *Ground Zero* jumps back and forth in time: chapter one is set in Tainan on 27 April 2017, 556 days after the nuclear accident and 156 days before the special election, but chapter two is established as happening somewhere on Yangming Mountain north of Taipei on 11 October 2014, 373 days before the accident. Ten chapters occur before the accident, 31 after, some occur hours before or later.

Beyond the date and time stamp at the beginning of the chapters in *Ground Zero*, each chapter in addition to its number begins with the English appellation of either "Above Ground Zero" or "Under Ground Zero." Although it is tempting to assume that the "above" chapters happen before the accident and the "under" chapters follow it, upon closer inspection a number of chapters which occur after the accident are listed as "Above Ground Zero." Moreover, the first chapter of the novel in which Lin awakens from a nightmare in the Tainan hospital and the final chapter in which the bodies of Lin and Li are found in what appears to be a staged love suicide carry the appellation "Ground Zero." In fact, as Hueichu Chu points out, "the 'Above Ground Zero' sequence is brought to an end only after the protagonist and other Taiwanese citizens become aware of the concealed nuclear accident and of the contamination it has caused."[23]

The lack of a stable ground zero or of multiple grounds zero as well as the fragmented non-linear time in *Ground Zero* like the fragmentary diary in *Taiwan in Ruins* suggests the disjointed flashbacks or hallucinations that are symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Thematic evidence of the mental illness unsurprisingly abounds in both novels, but formal elements contribute as well. Edward Gunn uses the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder advanced by the American Psychiatric Association to consider representations of trauma in both theory and practice with regard to literature from China. Such a practice seems useful for this consideration of the forms and themes from these two novels. Gunn writes:

> Among the various ways to discuss trauma there is the most narrow and specific definition of it as post-traumatic stress disorder …. The

[23] Hueichu Chu, "'After' the Catastrophe: Imagining Nuclear Disaster in Egoyan Zheng's *Ling didian* (*Ground Zero*)," p. 116.

> discourse of medicine does not necessarily match those of literature and cultural criticism, nor need they conform to each other, and the focus here is on the strategies that literature and cultural criticism adopt to represent trauma in comparison to a current medical definition. The definition includes a collection of symptoms, any one of which might not have anything to do with traumatic experience, but multiple symptoms point with increasing intensity to a psychological syndrome caused by traumatic shock. The symptoms include 'persistent re-experiencing the traumatic event [through intrusive memories or flashbacks, hallucinations or nightmares], persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness [such as detachment from other people], and persistent symptoms of increased arousal [insomnia, acute and unpredictable episodes of anger, and hypervigilance].'[24]

The inability to re-experience the traumatic event or intrusive memories, flashbacks, hallucinations, and nightmares seem to not only describe the formal structure of *Ground Zero* and *Taiwan in Ruins,* they thematically resonate with the worlds represented and the impossibility of representation. Though *Taiwan in Ruins* lacks a narrative device such as "ground zero", it too seems characterized by the disappearance of traumatic moments. The most glaring instances of this are the ten years since 2005, the beginning of Taiwan's self-imposed isolation, and the five years between 2010 and 2015, the time that elapses between Li's death and the arrival of the foreign scientists, wherein Taiwan's social and political systems collapse and leave the island in ruins. A similar lacuna appears in entries 21 through 23, September 2010, Li's fiancée Xiaohui disappears and he learns of both confusion on the coast and that fishing boats have already taken to the sea to recover bodies with nets. Xiaohui and Xiaowei (a boy in the couple's care) thereafter disappear; presumably drowning in the ocean.[25] Li was absent and television news is sporadic; furthermore, as he knows all too well professionally, such news is at best unreliable and at worst wholly fictitious. The

[24] Edward M. Gunn, "Compulsive Repetition of Rupture: Strategies of Representing Trauma," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* vol. 9, no. 2 (2015), p. 149.
[25] Zelai Song, *Taiwan in Ruins*, pp. 204-209.

disappearance of Xiaohui and Xiaowei into the ocean is an ellipsis. There is no description of their demise only the notification that bodies are being pulled from the ocean and the suggestion that a mass panic or suicide has perhaps been triggered by mandatory public-education television. Finally, it is unclear whether or not her body or ashes are in the tomb that he erects in her memory: possibly another absence.

In another entry hallucinatory fantasy appears: the nuclear power plant near his home strikes him as a "monster" a "frightening temple where people pray for demons and evil."[26] Furthermore, there is a numbness and detachment from other people and an unresponsiveness to surroundings throughout the novel. Nuclear accidents have become a common occurrence, or so it seems; people are blasé, there is little anxiety about radiation leaks from three nuclear power stations in 2000 which killed 200,000 people or about the lowered life expectancy in Taiwan to only 50 years. Li comments that it is not that people were not upset it is just that these things turn into political disputes and eventually dissidents end up in jail, nothing really gets done.[27] In an April entry Li notes his own detachment. He writes that one night at a meeting concerning yet another accident at a nuclear power plant only 50 kilometers from his dormitory he reflected on the reputation that Taiwan has attained among foreign contractors that build nuclear power plants as the Kingdom of Nuclear Power. He notes the assumed risk that the Taiwanese seem willing to take on. He also recalls the 2000 accident that cost 200,000 lives. His entry also describes how he and Xiaohui walked home after the meeting, how he silently ruminated on the possibility that they had contracted radiation poisoning, and how she stirred him from his thoughts to tell him in tears that she wanted them to get married before she dies.[28] He is numb to the inescapable doom and death, numb to her despair.

Reflections such as Li's on the meeting and the walk home are not the only returns in the novel. In fact, the protagonists in both texts repeatedly visit sites of human suffering, trauma, and atomic energy. The diary novel, with its repetitive nature seems suited to narrations of these sites and sights, because it is self-reflexive and self-contextualizing. The vacuum caused by a traumatic rupture

[26] Ibid., p. 56.
[27] Ibid., pp. 39-40.
[28] Ibid., p. 123.

comes into focus in part by repetitive happenings and in part by the repetition of absence, the rupture is always just happening or almost happening, imminent, yet also absent. In *Taiwan in Ruins* Xiaohui's disappearance or death is lost, missing from the videographer's conscious memory; sometime near entry 22 she disappears from Li's world, but not the diary. Moreover, in *Ground Zero* each of Lin's dreams seems to end in the seconds leading up to the rupture. Regardless of their unrepeatability the missing moments are repeatedly foregrounded in these dystopias.

Beyond the chronologies of *Taiwan in* Ruins and *Ground Zero,* as noted above, half of Zhang Dachun's "Notes on the Fire from the Sky*"* is comprised of a statement of events meticulously detailed hour by hour. Perhaps such repetitive iterations as well as the date and time stamp are inseperable attributes of nuclear narratives, especially disaster or dystopian narratives: they are a sure sign of the genre. In *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*, Theodore Martin demonstrates that the use of lists be they of clothing or of persons appears to have become a distinctive feature of contemporary novels of manners. He suggests with examples from *American Psycho, White Teeth,* and *Glamorama* that they are an indicator which both marks the genre and provides a means by which to see the drag of genre across time.[29] The repeated use of chronologies seems to resonate with the lists that Martin has found; moreover, though the chronologies themselves do not provide the means for an "extra-diegetic" dating of the texts, the narratives do offer a means of tracing the drag of the genre against decades of contemporary drift: "radiation rays" (核線 *hexian*) in *Taiwan in Ruins,* West German scientific assessments in "Notes on the Fire from the Sky", and Facebook in *Ground Zero*, for example. Moreover, in both novels the government and television corporations conspire and collude yet the form and content of the broadcasts change, which demonstrates the drag of the genre as the notion of the contemporary drifts over time like clouds of radioactive fallout drifting over the island. Indeed, science and technology as both the subject of ethical criticism and a narrative device plays a crucial role in

[29] Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), pp. 33-39.

these and other nuclear narratives. One prominent example is the dream capture technology so critical to *Ground Zero*.

> … Dr Li opens up another image file.
> 'What about...this one?'
> It seems to be the very same building. In the same wasteland. Greyscale. But this time the right side of the building has collapsed.
> 'This one was taken after the one we were looking at just now?'
> 'No, before.' The doctor looks at Lin Qunhao again. 'According to the time stamp of your dreamscape, it's chronologically earlier. So? Remember anything now?'
> He looks down and shakes his head. 'Nothing. Still nothing.'
> 'Okay, no problem. Then let's talk a bit about the dream itself. Do you remember the plot?'
> 'Not really,' Lin Qunhao hesitates. 'It was disturbing, it seems.'
> Was it?' the doctor asks. 'Then close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Deeper. Good.' Lin Qunhao closes his eyes and feels faint red rays beaming through the lids. Like tracks of blood.
> 'Good. Now please concentrate on that emotion. Or on images from the dream. Alright. Another deep breath—are you okay?'
> 'Well, some of it's coming back to me—'
> 'What?'
> 'Some men were chasing me.' Lin Qunhao opens his eyes. 'They were trying to kill me.'
> 'I see. Please continue—'
> 'I didn't know who they were, or why they were coming for me. I was terrified... I panicked and I guess I ran out of a room. I ran and ran, until I arrived in front of this ruin—'
> 'Uh huh, I understand. Please continue.'
> 'Well...' Lin Qunhao says. 'That's about it. Maybe something else happened while I was running, but I don't remember what.'
> 'You mean you have an inkling that there's something else? That you're forgetting something?'
> 'Yes. Something else happened. But I can't remember.'

> 'Okay, I understand.' Dr Li Liqing gazes at him, falling silent. 'Well... let me see. You've been receiving this course of Dream Image Reconstruction Therapy for quite some time now. I remain optimistic. But lately, it seems to me, we haven't made much progress.' The doctor pauses. 'What's your assessment of the situation?'
> 'Meaning?' Lin Qunhao shakes his head. 'No comment.'
> 'No comment? But you claim to be an engineer from the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant.'
> 'Yes, I have no doubt about that,' Lin Qunhao sighs. 'I remember my job. We've been over that. But I really don't remember what happened after that.'[30]

Technology and the first dream capture exchange between Dr. Li Liqing and Lin, her engineer patient, introduces the ground zero lacuna. In fact, the worlds of Li Xinfu in *Taiwan in Ruins* and Lin Qunhao in *Ground Zero* are unmoored by traumatic ellipses stemming from technological crises: moments impossible to locate and much less represent. Significantly the ellipses seem to be ignored by or simply covered up by the media as represented in the novels. Such cover-ups or the inability to acknowledge nuclear disasters may not only stem from trauma, because the media consumed by the characters is unreliable, subject to manipulation. Moreover, it is the product of a particular form of corporate and government collusion in the narratives of both Yi Geyan and Zhang Dachun. It takes hours or days for authorities from each nuclear power plant administrating body to admit something is wrong in both "*Notes on the Fire from the Sky*" and *Ground Zero*. Here we find a continuity between reality and its fictional signification. The explosion at Chernobyl happened on 26 April 1986, but the official government announcement of the accident came on 14 May 1986: 18 days late.[31]

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[30] Egoyan Zheng, *Ground Zero*, pp. 19-21. The translation is from Egoyan Zheng, "Ground Zero Excerpt," trans. Darryl Sterk, Books from Taiwan, accessed Oct 22, 2020, https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books_img/GROUNDZERO.pdf.
[31] Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*, p. 74.

Inadequate Representations

According to Liu Lier, in March 2013 a prominent media pundit in Taiwan said that "no one had died or been exposed to radiation in the Fukushima accident", but on the very same day the Tokyo Electric Power Company admitted that one laborer had died from the explosion.[32] Moreover, she writes that the Taiwan Power Company paid for advertising which falsely claimed radiation was harmless.[33] Taiwan Power was not the first to turn to propaganda. The Pacific Gas and Electric Company undertook a massive public relations campaign, including public service announcements, to assuage fears in the San Francisco Bodega Bay area that the construction of a nuclear power plant had stirred in 1958. And only a few years later "[d]uring the five-year period 1963-1967, American agencies made available over twice as many films about reactors and three times as many about nuclear safety and the environment as they had offered during the five years preceding."[34] Almost 20 years later on the other side of the Pacific Ocean regularly broadcast public service announcements sponsored by Taiwan Power that extolled the virtues and safety of nuclear power on what was at the time only three television channels in part motivated Song Zelai to write *Taiwan in Ruins*. Almost 50 years later, the pundit, the nuclear regulatory commission, and the Taiwan Power Company were concealing the truth, because they feared letting the Taiwanese people know the dangers of nuclear power.[35]

Throughout *Ground Zero* President Ma and officials seem to be playing cat and mouse with the media, or simply manipulating it. *Taiwan in Ruins* paints a bleaker picture. There is no game to be played between journalists and powerful officials, because the latter employ the former. Moreover, the line between fact and fiction is permeable in the "action art" of Yi Geyan: the president in the novel is President Ma and at the time the text was published the president of

[32] Lier Liu, *Abolishing Nuclear Power: Creating a Safe Future for the Children* (Taipei: Business Today, 2013), p. 86.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Spencer R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), pp. 175-176.
[35] Lier Liu, *Abolishing Nuclear Power: Creating a Safe Future for the Children*, pp. 86-88.

Taiwan was Ma Yingjiu. The media in both novels draw attention to the dates of their publication and suggest Ebert's hybridized reading strategy and perhaps reveal the genre drag of which Martin writes. *Ground Zero* portrays realistically the mediascape of early 21st century Taiwan: the more traditional genre of saccharine talk-shows filled with vitriolic exchanges between the left and the right as well as the fluid world of emerging social media platforms. Conversely the mediascape of *Taiwan in Ruins* as a number of critics including Long Yingtai and Chen Jianzhong have pointed out is more dystopian, Orewellian.[36] There is no Big Brother watching Li or Xiaohui's every move, but the population is required to regularly watch government produced educational television and as in George Orwell's dystopian tale televisions are everywhere. In the days shortly before Xiaohui's disappearance, the government has mandated five hours viewing per day, much more than the mandatory "Two Minute Hates" of Orwell's Oceania, and with equally if not more disturbing effects.[37]

Song Zelai wrote his novel in the years shortly before the 1987 lifting of martial law and Yi Geyan's text arrives almost 30 years later, yet both strikingly portray mass and social media as but distracting the majority of the population and easily manipulated by powerful officials. Such officials and the world they signify are those under fire from activists such as Liu Lier for their stubborn refusal to accept reality. In these two novels officials refuse and demand that the media similarly refuse to acknowledge or to allow to come into play representational images which obtain not in and of themselves but in the objects, ideas, and actions to which they refer; on the contrary, they assure that the mass media is a purveyor of alluring and distracting images: the *prolefeed* of *1984*.[38]

Regardless of the images on televisions, or desktop, notebook, and tablet computers as well as smartphone screens, for the persons who actually encounter an atomic accident there can be no quick switch between reality and signification. There is a resonance to be found in the day of the accident in *Ground Zero* and the real events at Chernobyl. Lin the engineer who has been involved in the

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[36] Yingtai Long, "The 1984 of Taiwan: On Taiwan in Ruins," *Contemporary* 1 (May 1986), p. 150. Jianzhong Chen, *Toward a Radical Love: A Study of Zelai Song's Novels*, pp. 154-166.

[37] George Orwell (Eric A. Blair), *1984* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2003), pp. 10-16.

[38] Ibid. Appendix.

salvage of the construction of the power plant arrives at the guardhouse on the day the plant is to finally come on-line only to be told by the guard that he has the day off. It seems official plans have changed. He is sent home when clearly something has happened but there is a flat denial of any problem.

In her anthropological study of environmental crisis and the politics of medicine and health care in Ukraine, Adriana Petryna interviewed victims of the Chernobyl accident of 1986. According to one interviewee, on the day of the explosion she was told to go home, there was no need to work. When she asked if she should be concerned about radiation poisoning from the explosion, the official replied, "what disaster."

> Rita had worked as a gatekeeper in central gate security at the Chernobyl power plant, several hundred meters away from the wall of the reactor. She occupied her post at 8:00 A.M. the morning the plant exploded. "The explosion happened at 1:40 A.M. A first, second, and third rotation of firemen arrived and fought the fire from 2:00 A.M. and partially contained it by 6:00 A.M." When I asked her why she went to work knowing the risks, she told me that she had been more concerned about losing her pension and social benefits had she not shown up for work. Rita was given no protective gear and observed a powerful machine in pieces: "There was white steam, burning graphite from the reactor core everywhere on the ground, reinforcement bars on the concrete of the roof hung over like bent strings, what a force."
>
> Rita called the head of gate security by telephone. "He said, 'What disaster? We'll send out transport.'" She mocked her boss's swift but feeble denial of the event. As for some of Rita's coworkers, "They insisted on staying until the leadership arrived." The transport never arrived; neither did the leadership. The entries in her medical records from this date forward indicate the influence of state policy on the shape of her biological experience. These entries foreordained present possibilities and impossibilities of social action.[39]

[39] Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. p. 122.

Similarly, Lin's experiences are determined by state medical officials. And like Rita, Lin leaves behind the site of the disaster and several of his colleagues. But unlike Rita he later receives blank text messages from those who are supposedly in the plant. In the Taiwan of *Ground Zero* even interpersonal media destabilize reality. In this case it is impossible to ascertain if it is political intervention or an electromagnetic pulse that erases the text messages.

Following the instant of disaster and the hours or days of denial there are lingering chronic human and environmental health problems at the site of the accident. Initially there are the exclusion zones such as those erected around Chernobyl, Fukushima, and Gongliao. Such disaster areas figure largely in depictions of nuclear catastrophe in fiction such as the lawless but just world of the Chernobyl exclusion zone in *Wolves Eat Dogs* (2001) by Martin Cruz, the location of quiet panic and despair in writer/director Uchida Nobuteru's film *Odayaka* (2012), a large swatch of northern Taiwan in *Ground Zero*, and various locales in *Taiwan in Ruins*. These are places where those who remain develop their own realities, social economies, and biological citizenships in a world impossible to represent but one that they nonetheless inhabit, a place where the scale of time unfolds from the moment of nuclear catastrophe to unimaginably distant moments in the future. It is a place, which in the words of Petryna is not concerned with "the rhetorics and images that project the value of the human as universally given but with the mundane office spaces, clinics, wards, and homes where the chances for justice, benevolence, and non-malfeasance, where individual accounts of suffering, if they are to be heard at all, must transmogrify into numbers and codes fitting standard categories."[40] Such accounts of suffering will continue long into the future, beyond the nanoseconds of controlled and uncontrolled fission. And communities arise officially and unofficially within and without the exclusion zones as found in *Ground Zero* and *Taiwan in Ruins*.

In *Taiwan in Ruins* Li and his colleagues drive past the site of a nuclear waste spill which has been covered with a layer of concrete. This passage in the 1985 novel is prescient of the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl accident near the border of Ukraine and Belarus, because it contains a slab of concrete that portends the concrete sarcophagus constructed to contain the radiation spilling

[40] Ibid., p. 20.

from the exploded power plant. The sarcophagus, which was constructed of 400,000 cubic meters of concrete and over 7,000 tons of steel, has now been deemed insufficient and a New Shelter is being built to contain the sarcophagus erected to contain the destroyed nuclear power plant. The temporal scales of these waste sites be they fact or fiction bring us back to the crisis of scale.

In *About a Mountain*, John D'Agata, set out to find out why groups of schoolchildren in Las Vegas were being told that the containment structure for radioactive waste at Yucca Mountain, Nevada was being designed to last ten thousand years. After referring to a number of government publications, and being passed from administrator to administrator, he finally telephoned Robert Fri, the then chairman of the Board on Radioactive Waste Management at the National Research Council, who explained that federal policy managers had decreased numbers from an original study wherein he and his co-authors had written,

> "The reason for imposing a time frame on the Yucca Mountain project would be to ensure that there are no significant health risks to humans during the waste's storage. Taking into consideration that some potentially harmful exposures may still be possible several hundred thousand years following the mountain's closure, we therefore recommend that a time frame be established that includes those periods of peak potential risks … which could be on the order of a million years or more."[41]

In another interview D'Agata spoke with Bob Halstead, a nuclear waste consultant hired by the state of Nevada to protect it from the establishment of the waste repository. Halstead told D'Agata,

> "What we're dealing with here, is an exercise in planning for a nuclear catastrophe that is fundamentally rhetorical. It's theatrical security, because the preparations that are being made by the Department of Energy have no real chance of succeeding. They satisfy the public, however, because they're a symbol of control. Ten thousand years sounds like a long time,

[41] John D'Agata, *About a Mountain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 67.

> right? But in terms of doing what the mountain needs to do, ten thousand years is useless. This waste is going to be deadly for tens of thousands of years."[42]

Given the absurdity of administration and regulation for tens of thousands of years or a million years or more that Fri and Halstead explain to D'Agata the plans for only 300 years of regulation at the Vector Radioactive Waste Management Facility at the site of the Chernobyl disaster seem level-headed.[43]

Still, there is almost no connection between reality and the symbols, the language, or the rhetoric, that they purport to represent. Halstead is correct. Planning for nuclear catastrophe is fundamentally wordplay; in Ebert's nomenclature "everything is signification and signification is all we know about reality." The scale of nuclear power further compounds the crisis of textual representation. According to the Atomic Energy Council, in Taiwan the Jinshan Nuclear Power Plant has generated 5,838 spent fuel rods, the Guosheng Nuclear Power Plant 8,092, and the Maanshan Nuclear Power Plant 2,538, which adds up to a total of 16,455 spent fuel rods during the 35 years that Taiwan Electric has been operating nuclear power plants. According to Liu, these spent fuel rods are equivalent to 23,000 atomic bombs like that dropped on Hiroshima.[44] The disposal of this waste on Lanyu island, like the disposal of waste in Calsbad, New Mexico, the New Shelter in Pripyat, the attempts to freeze ground water near Fukushima, and the hillside of concrete in *Taiwan in Ruins*, defy imagination and defy oversight.

Perhaps indignation rather than fear is the response these two novels seek to effect with shadowy government officials, unstable temporalities, and trauma. In fact, it is indignation on the part of local residents that brings about the slab of concrete in *Taiwan in Ruins*. In chapter seven, the journal entry dated April, Li writes about the hill that has been entirely encased in concrete: a hill that the government had covertly turned into a disposal site for spent fuel rods as the 19th

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[42] Ibid., p. 68.

[43] Volodymyr I Kholosha, Olexandr A. Kretinin, Anatoliy D. Novikov, and Volodymyr V. Tokarevsky, "Vector Complex in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone: 2010 - status and perspectives - 10250." *Waste Management Conference* (Phoenix, AZ: March 7-11, 2010), p. 1.

[44] Lier Liu, *Abolishing Nuclear Power: Creating a Safe Future for the Children*, pp. 116-117.

nuclear power plant had been completed in 1999. As local residents experienced a spike in cancer, opponents to the site leaked its existence and the government immediately removed the waste to another location; however, the damage had been done. Now the hillside was concrete, a place painted a color that "hurt the eyes" and upon which not a blade of grass grew.[45] In this case it seems that the destruction of a village now known as a "wasteland village" 40 kilometers from the Tropic of Cancer was the result of inadequate planning by successive administrations. It is worth noting that Song Zelai's critique drew heavily from reality: a government under increasing scrutiny and pressure in the late 1970s. In fact, the well-known Kaohsiung Incident (*Meilidao shijian*) occurred only one month after work had begun on the first nuclear power plant in Taiwan. *Taiwan in Ruins*, despite its formal contrivances seems to criticize the political reality of Taiwan in the 1980s rather than reifying the power structures it seeks to disclose.

Ground Zero as already noted is explicitly and unreservedly connected with the reality of government, politics, and nuclear power; moreover, the novel seems closely tied to the mechanical and technological reality of nuclear power in Taiwan. The power plant in question in *Ground Zero* is very much a reflection of the situation in Gongliao, and it resembles in form the novel itself with its disjointed and intermittent progress. In the chapters leading up to the disaster Lin and his colleagues grapple with the task of completing a power plant that has been under construction for decades. Eventually delays and disconnections lead to a disastrous cluster of oversights. The potential for disaster escalates, because, as Weart demonstrates in other cases, "[a]s a few experienced engineers point out, and as events would later show, what cause[s] actual accidents in any technological system [is] more modest [than spectacular imaginary disasters]. Nearly always there [is] some combination of three factors: a hidden flaw in the design of one of the thousands of components, along with inadequate instrumentation that gave a poor picture of what was going on, along with mistakes by inadequately trained workers."[46]

Lin and his colleagues are faced with assembling ill-fitting components as they begin the task of bringing the fourth nuclear power plant on-line. This is

[45] Zelai Song, *Taiwan in Ruins*, p. 97.
[46] Spencer R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*, pp. 178.

particularly daunting because instead of one general contractor there are several contractors negotiating among themselves on the project. In fact, contractors have sub-contracted and those subcontractors have further sub-contracted. Seeking to verify standards or to demand compensation or re-fabrication the engineers discover that in some cases the manufacturers of pipes, valves, and other key components are no longer in business. Moreover, due to intermittent construction, portions of the plant have long been exposed to the elements adding corrosion and mold to their list of problems. The power plant that fails has been constructed as the story is told: fragmentarily. The narration is as inadequate as is the construction of the fictional nuclear power plant, but the reality of Gongliao also is piecemeal and has been in progress for decades.

In *Tawian in Ruins* foreign contractors are welcomed to Taiwan, the Kingdom of Nuclear Power, but they also play a role as an absence in *Ground Zero*. During an inspection Lin and his colleague Caitou (literally vegetable head, a nickname stemming from his large shaved head) discuss the multitudinous problems they find.[47] Among the tumble of materials and partially constructed structures Lin finds pipes which can no longer be trusted because of corrosion. But more importantly their conversation comes to the problem of oversight: not only is there not a single contractor responsible for the fourth nuclear power plant as there has been for the previous three, instead individual contractors now are in charge of monitoring themselves. Moreover, the project has been so long in the making that many if not most of the engineers who had worked on the previous power plants have by and large retired, in other words institutional memory is gone. Oversight as well as media representation is inadequate.

Let us draw on these inadequacies to return to the problems of contemporaneity and semiotics before the final turn to representation and signification. First, how can we simplify the problem of contemporaneity in this context. We may often consider two persons as contemporaries if they perhaps live through the same moment. In Taiwan although Lai He or Yang Kui are of a very different generation than Zhang Wenhuan, for example, they each were a part of the Japanese colonial era; therefore, in a manner of speaking they were contemporaries. Similarly, though we would not likely consider Song Zelai and Yi Geyan to be of the same generation, they both

[47] Egoyan Zheng, *Ground Zero*, p. 65.

unquestionably are of the era of nuclear energy in Taiwan; moreover, their novels seem to follow the theorizations of Theodore Martin. However, as Martin argues, the contemporary drifts. It is by its very nature deictic and necessarily what is contemporary now will not be contemporary two decades from now, and yet it will be. There are, he observes, contemporaries, more than one contemporary.[48] The contemporary that Martin describes is primarily that of contemporary art and literature, but in the case of these novels and nuclear energy generally we need also address the forward drift of the contemporary, a forward drift not of only literature and art but the forward drift of radioactive waste: a countlessly multigenerational "hyperobject" that causes "slow violence."[49] These concerns notwithstanding, for us to conclude this contemplation of these two novels it may suffice to focus on inadequate institutional oversight and untrustworthy mass media as instances of genre drag in Taiwanese dystopian fiction.

Secondly and before concluding, arising from an inadequate mass media is a breakdown in disaster semiotics. A large-scale release of radiation may stem from technological mismanagement, yet ultimately the disaster is a natural disaster. Biological organisms will react to a massive dose of radiation in a natural way. Consequently, we may approach the disasters or catastrophes in these novels on one level as Han-liang Chang approached the 2004 Sumatra-Andaman earthquake and ensuing tsunami.[50] "Whether it's an earthquake or a tsunami, a natural disaster involves at least three phases: (1) a natural happening; (2) the interpretation of it; (3) after effects of the happening."[51] Chang describes in great analytical detail the chain of events of the catastrophe and details the relationship of signs, occurrences, and occasions including the imminence and disappearance of a disaster that resonates with the impossibility of depicting the moment of disaster

[48] Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*, pp. 1-10.

[49] For more on these concepts see Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2013), and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013).

[50] Han-liang Chang, "Disaster Semiotics: An Alternative 'Global Semiotics'?", Paper presented at the International Semiotics Institute, Seminar 2: Global Semiotics, Imatra, Finland, June 11-19, 2005, accessed Oct 22, 2020, http://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/~changhl/changhl/Disaster%20Semiotics.pdf.

[51] Ibid., p. 9.

discussed above: "… a disaster occurrence never comes isolated but enters into a chain of causality."[52] The complexity of the process is beyond the scope of this essay; however, there is one crucial step in the chain of causality which does surface explicitly in both novels: a breakdown in the linking of a *natsign* (short-range signs … not produced for communication) and the moment we recognize a *significante occurrence* (the occurrence that the *natsign* indicates.)[53] In the case of the 2004 tsunami it was two subsequent occurrences: receding waves and stranded fish; in the case of *Ground Zero* it is the start-up of the fourth nuclear power plant and "[l]ocal residents crowd[ing] drugstores to buy remedies for their "flu" symptoms such as nausea and vomiting (Chapter 29)."[54] In *Taiwan in Ruins* there is the similar situation of the secretly constructed waste disposal site and the spike in cancer. Although both of these situations are far slower than the 2004 tsunami, in both cases the impacted communities are unable to interpret facts or *natsigns*, because of inadequate or misleading media reports. In short, the mediascapes depicted by Song Zelai and Yi Geyan, foreclose the possibility of a functioning disaster semiotics as elaborated by Chang. Both of these problems in particular, and others discussed above, seem to lead us back to Welsh's question about the "moral duty of literature."

The City of Aglaura and the Island of Taiwan

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan of a city which resembles the world of nuclear power as described in both *Taiwan in Ruins* and *Ground Zero*, as well as the reality described by Weart, Petryna, Liu, and D'Agata: Aglaura. Marco Polo tells the Yuan emperor:

> There is little I can tell you about Aglaura beyond the things its own inhabitants have always repeated: an array of proverbial faults, a few eccentricities, some punctilious regard for rules. Ancient observers, whom there is no reason not to presume truthful, attributed to Aglaura

[52] Ibid., p. 11.
[53] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
[54] Hueichu Chu, "'After' the Catastrophe: Imagining Nuclear Disaster in Egoyan Zheng's *Ling didian* (*Ground Zero*)," p. 115.

> its enduring assortment of qualities, surely comparing them to those of the other cities of their times. Perhaps neither the Aglaru that is reported nor the Aglaura that is visible has greatly changed since then, but what was bizarre has become usual, what seemed normal is now an oddity, and virtues and faults differently distributed. In this sense, nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of the city, whereas the haphazard opinions which might be inferred from living there have less substance. This is the result: the city that they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less.[55]

In other words, the representation of the city is more real than the city itself, or as Welsh puts it, "Its discourse - despite its inaccuracy - has substance, it can communicate a solid idea of the city of Aglarua. The city itself, however - or rather the image of the city gathered by experience rather than discourse - is unsubstantial, incommunicable, and utterly unable to endure: lacking the words to fix it, it fades away… "[56]

In these two novels the real Taiwan fades away into ruins, because corporate and government manipulation of the media control public discourse thereby creating a significatory world which eclipses the experiential world of the protagonists. And yet, by foregrounding the occlusion *Taiwan in Ruins* and *Ground Zero* seem to combat and undermine existing structures of repression. The Kingdom of Nuclear Power and disarray of the Gongliao Nuclear Power Plant as inscribed by Song Zelai and Yi Geyan seem not only to offer prospects for further research into questions of scale and contemporary drift to name but two, they also, at least provisionally, appear "to fulfill the moral duty of literature."

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[55] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities,* trans. William Weaver, (Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 1974), p. 67.

[56] John Welsh, "Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation," p. 11.

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