

CLAUDIA FIORITO

## Caught in a “mousetrap”: An analysis of the relationship of the local population with the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in film and television productions (1990–2021)

Попавшие в „мышеловку”: анализ отношения местного населения к Чернобыльской Зоне Отчуждения в кино- и телепродукции (1990–2021 гг.)

**Abstract.** The release of the television series *Chernobyl* (HBO, Sky Atlantic 2019) drew renewed attention to the tragedy, its locations, and the affected population, generating new productions in Russia, such as the film *Chernobyl: Abyss* (Danila Kozlovskij, 2021), explicitly made in response to the Western series, signalling a desire to re-appropriate the narrative of the disaster and its territories. Indeed, a recurrent characteristic of the film and television productions of the countries most affected by the 1986 nuclear disaster (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia) has been the representation of the land and the inhabitants’ relationship with it (Lindbladh 2019). This is also a central theme in Svetlana Alexievich’s renowned 1997 work *Voices from Chernobyl: Chronicle of the future*, whose stories inspired some episodes of the Anglo-American series. This article analyzes the representation of the relationship between the inhabitants of the Chernobyl/Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and their homeland in film and television productions dedicated to the nuclear disaster, beginning with Eastern European films made in the early 1990s, moving on to the representation in the Western series, and culminating with an analysis of Kozlovskij’s *Chernobyl: Abyss*. Features considered include the development of romantic narratives within the contaminated zone, the visual representation of radiation, and the depiction of the local institutions’ response to the disaster.

**Keywords:** Chernobyl, Chernobyl, cinema, TV series, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia

Claudia Fiorito, University of Padua, Padua – Italy, [claudia.fiorito@phd.unipd.it](mailto:claudia.fiorito@phd.unipd.it), <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5966-3764>

### Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe, before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, films on this subject were aimed at com-

memorating the victims of the incident<sup>1</sup>. Notable examples are the first documentaries shot shortly after the nuclear disaster, *Kolokol Chernobylya* (*The bell of Chernobyl*, Rollan Serhienko, 1987) and *Chernobyl. Khronika trudnykh nedel* (*Chernobyl: Chronicle of difficult weeks*, Volodymyr Shevchenko, 1988)<sup>2</sup>. Both films focus on the victims and witnesses of the disaster, featuring interviews with local people, who recount the grief experienced in the recently abandoned lands. Although these documentaries were shot around the same time, different circumstances surrounded their release. The first film, commissioned by the central government of the Soviet Union, was released immediately after its production; by contrast, the latter, realised by an independent all-Ukrainian crew, encountered an unexpected delay in its release. The Ukrainian production specifically focused on highlighting the efforts and actions of the local population, but also strongly criticised Party members who chose to abandon the contaminated zone and “hid in the villages” instead of offering assistance despite the inevitable health risks. The documentary portrayed Party meetings where these so-called “deserters” were openly condemned and subsequently excluded from the Party. While *Kolokol Chernobylya* was released in 1987, Shevchenko’s documentary reached audiences only in 1988, an event the director did not live to see: he died at the age of 57, in March 1987, due to the consequences of radiation exposure during the nuclear disaster.

The difficult topic of the relationship of the inhabitants of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) with their homeland also inevitably characterises the fictional productions dedicated to the nuclear accident<sup>3</sup>. This article offers an analysis of the depiction of the catastrophe in selected films and TV series produced in the areas most directly affected by the consequences of the nuclear disaster – Ukraine, Belarus and Russia – and also aims to show how, by contrast, this aspect is overlooked in a Western fictional depiction. My analysis focuses on the following productions: the films *Rozpad* (*Decay*, 1990, Ukraine) by Mikhail Belikov, *Dusha moya, Mariya* (*Maria, my soul*, 1993, Belarus) by Vyacheslav Nikiforov and *V subbotu* (*Innocent Saturday*, 2011, Russia) by Aleksandr Min-

<sup>1</sup> In this text, widely recognized names (e.g. “Alexievich”, “Tarkovsky”) are presented in their most known English forms. When referring to Ukrainian cities, the decision has been made to transliterate the names of places in Ukraine from Ukrainian and not from Russian, giving Chornobyl, Kyiv, and Pryp’iat’, for example, rather than Chernobyl, Kiev, and Pripyat.

<sup>2</sup> The titles used for international distribution are indicated in brackets, for example *Motyl’ki* and *Innocent Saturday*. In cases where there is no recognized title in English, I provide my own translation, such as for *Decay*.

<sup>3</sup> The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is the area surrounding the site of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster, covering approximately 30 kilometers. The contaminated area is much larger, however, and extends into the territories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, spanning approximately 150,000 square kilometers (International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA]).

dadze, and the TV series *Motyl'ki* (*Inseparable*, 2013, Ukraine) by Vitalij Vorobyov. To trace a comparison with Western productions, the world-acclaimed series *Chernobyl* (2019, United States, United Kingdom), written and produced by Craig Mazin, will be examined.

Foregrounding the relationship of those affected by the tragedy with the contaminated lands, the first section of the article will show how in Eastern European films and TV series, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is depicted as a place from which it is impossible to separate, due to the protagonists' emotional attachment to their homeland, while the Western series, *Chernobyl*, instead focuses on the immediate danger of radiation contamination.

In contrast to the idea of the CEZ as a place impossible to leave due to the characters' attachment to it, the impossibility of leaving the CEZ because of external factors will also be discussed. In this regard, the second part of the article focuses on the representation of the role of institutions, specifically the Soviet government's reaction to the disaster. Here I will explore the differences between the Ukrainian film *Rozpad*, Mindadze's *V subbotu*, the first Russian-made fiction film (produced 25 years after the power plant disaster) to focus on the Chornobyl tragedy (Lindbladh 2012: 113–126), and the Western TV series *Chernobyl*, while underscoring that these productions adopt a political position, ascribing responsibility for the Chornobyl disaster to the Soviet authorities and criticising their response to it.

Building upon the portrayal of the danger of contamination, the third section will analyze the representation of radioactivity, reflecting on the challenges involved in this and showing how it is evoked through visual techniques both in the Ukrainian TV series *Motyl'ki* and the Anglo-American series *Chernobyl*. The final section will trace parallels between the Western series *Chernobyl* and the recent Russian film *Chernobyl: Abyss* (2021), taken as an example of the Russian government's reappropriation of the narrative of the disaster.

### **Leaving the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone: An impossible journey? Emotional attachment to a radioactive land**

Recent academic work has analyzed the representation of the relationship of the inhabitants of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) with their lands in films and TV series made in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia (Briukhovetska 95–121; Lindbladh 2019: 240–256). In fact, leaving the CEZ is often shown to be an impossible task for the protagonists, and is depicted as an internal conflict that takes different forms. The main reasons that link the people to the contaminated land, enabling them to overlook the dangers it represents, can be identified as

their sense that it is their civic and moral duty to stay in the CEZ to help others; the impossibility of leaving due to emotional attachment; or the need to return, whether motivated by nostalgia for one's life before the tragedy or, on the contrary, to plunder what remains.

In this regard, Lindbladh (2019) proposes a novel interpretation of Nikolai Berdyaev's work, *The Russian idea (Russkaya ideya)*, which defines the eschatological orientation of Slavic consciousness in contrast to Western culture (Berdyaev). Drawing upon this philosophical framework, Lindbladh contends that in audiovisual productions originating in Eastern Europe, the Chernobyl disaster does not signify the end, but rather a pivotal moment in history when people must take action in order to restore life, suggesting a cyclical, non-linear view of time. Conversely, she argues that traditional Western thinking perceives the end as inherently negative, viewing it as the conclusive termination of a linear chain of events, and therefore rejecting any potential positive outcome from the Chernobyl disaster, portraying it as a historical endpoint without the possibility of rebirth.

The notion of the existence of a common Slavic consciousness, as theorized by Berdyaev and once posited as a speculative construct, groups the former Soviet nations under Moscow's imperialist influence as a unified entity, stripping them of individual national attributes. However, Lindbladh (2019) challenges Berdyaev's perspective, emphasizing that the unity of the three examined countries can be understood as being solely due to their inevitable geographic inclusion within the CEZ. The author maintains that the artists and filmmakers from the countries whose lands were impacted by the nuclear tragedy adopt a particular stance regarding the fate of that land. Within their narratives, there is, in fact, an anticipation of the potential rebirth of these places, driven either by their characters' yearning to reunite with their homeland or their inherent refusal to accept separation from it. Building on Lindbladh's line of thought, the following paragraphs will further emphasize how the theme of the potential rebirth of the contaminated territories is overlooked in the HBO series *Chernobyl*, where separation from the CEZ is portrayed as the only possible outcome of the tragedy. Additionally, in the Western series, the responsibility for the disaster is clearly attributed to the Soviet government – a theme also present in the 2011 Russian movie *V subbotu*.

In Eastern European film, the impossibility of leaving the CEZ due to an emotional attachment to its land and a deep-rooted, enduring feeling of belonging is often conveyed through narratives linked to a love connection between two characters. Examples of this trope can be found as early as 1990, in the Ukrainian film *Rozpad*, in which a newlywed couple abandons its own wedding party and ends up taking a bike trip into the Zone, wandering from place to place and ignoring the evacuation order. The journey ends at a village church, where the two lovers ask

the priest to bless their union, but he is forced to evacuate the church by liquidators before he can officiate the ritual.

The mini-series *Motyl'ki* takes the motif of doomed love even further, as it revolves around the story of its two young main characters. Produced in Ukraine and aired on the popular TV channel Inter in 2013, the series was written by Valerij Muchariamov and directed by Vitalij Vorobyov<sup>4</sup>. For the protagonists Alya and Pasha, the city of Pryp'iat' is the only place where their love can unfold and flourish. After the explosion of the reactor and the evacuation of the surrounding area, the two protagonists live in the deserted city, which seems to be suspended in time. They break into homes in search of food, play dress-up in clothing shops and fix their hair in abandoned salons. Pasha had been one of the so-called liquidators of Chernobyl, tasked with removing the highly radioactive debris from the roof of the nuclear power plant and, as a result, he had been exposed to a lethal amount of radiation. However, although the two are aware of the dangers of radiation exposure, they reject the idea of fleeing and instead hide from the authorities, fearing that they will be separated if caught. In this case, therefore, the CEZ is impossible to leave because it is the only place where the two young lovers can be together.

Films made in Belarus also contribute to the theme of people's attachment to the contaminated land. The strong reaction of Belarusian cinematographers to the disaster is likely explained by the severe consequences that hit the country in the aftermath of the tragedy: Belarus was, in fact, the country most affected, hit by 70% of the radioactive fallout from the reactor explosion, which led to the loss of approximately 23% of its territory (Arndt 297), three times more than the amount of territory lost in Ukraine (Zhukova 486). Belarusian cinema began to draw attention to the Chernobyl tragedy from the early 1990s onwards, if we exclude the pro-regime productions of the years immediately following the accident<sup>5</sup>. After the collapse of the USSR, the tone of the country's film productions became more openly denunciatory of the Soviet authorities and the consequences of the disaster (Romanova 457). As early as 1991, the film *Volki v zone* (*The wolves in the zone*, Viktor Deriugin) denounced the phenomenon of CEZ looters, who stole valuables from abandoned houses and resold them, endangering the health of buyers by exporting highly radioactive objects to the rest of the USSR. The main character, Rodion, an ex-police officer, seeks to restore order and fight crime in the Zone by taking on a gang of traffickers who are involved in dealing contaminated goods in

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that both Muchariamov and Vorobyov are Russian and that the series featured a prominent Russian cast who performed in Russian. This positions *Motyl'ki* more as a Russian product aimed at Ukrainian audiences, which reflects the prevalent trend of audiovisual production in Ukraine prior to the national reforms that began in 2015, which led to a resurgence in Ukraine's internal film industry.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth examination of 1990s Belarusian cinema see (Stulov).

cahoots with the local police. His actions are motivated by a sense of civic duty, but also by his nostalgia for the memories of his old life before the disaster.

The theme of nostalgia recurs, and is extremely pronounced, in the Belarusian films *Dusha moya, Mariya* (1993) by Vyacheslav Nikiforov and *Ja pomnyu* (*I remember*, 2005) by Sergei Sychev. *Dusha moya, Mariya*, based on a theatre play by Dmitrij Michleev (Stulov), follows the life of Mikola Achremchik, an old farmer left alone in his village after its evacuation. Exposed to a lethal amount of radiation, Mikola lives in a state between hallucination and reality, which leads him to believe that he sees a young woman bearing the name of his late wife. Mariya is a figment of the protagonist's imagination, but she is also a creature generated by radiation, comparable to the character of Hari in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* (1972). Similarly to the protagonist of *Solaris*, in fact, Mikola initially tries to get rid of the woman – he abandons her with his boat by the river, for example, and locks her inside a government office; these efforts are in vain, however, as she reappears by his side at every attempt. Endowed with supernatural powers, and visible only to Mikola, Mariya is able to foretell the death of people she encounters – such as the group of thieves looting the protagonist's house – and to inflict lethal doses of radiation at her touch. Mikola is initially forced to leave his home by his son, who arrives to rescue him. Nevertheless, being aware of the certainty of his death and finally accepting the presence of the supernatural woman, he decides to return to the contaminated village to live out his last days by her side, as he admits that nobody but she, not even his late wife, ever loved him.

Similarly, in *Ja pomnyu*, the protagonist, a Belarusian painter who escaped the CEZ to live in Minsk, is drawn back to his old village as the only place to which he feels a sense of belonging, and, most importantly, where he can mend his relationship with his partner and start a new life. After their child is born in the Belarusian CEZ, the contaminated land there becomes the only place where couple can be together and start a family.

### **The CEZ as a trap: The role of institutions**

Another important theme in film and television productions about the Chornobyl tragedy is the role of institutions, which are invariably linked to the creation of an often-hostile setting for the protagonists, with lethal consequences for population of the CEZ. The lack of clear communication on the part of the Soviet authorities and the creation of an environment in which not only dissent but also the dissemination of information are suppressed make its spaces even more stifling, turning the CEZ into what could be considered a radioactive prison.

A strong and explicit critique of the Soviet authorities' incompetence is voiced in the 1990 Ukrainian film *Rozpad*. In one scene following the night of the accident, a doctor pleads with people on the streets of Pryp'iat' – including children and people gathering for a wedding – to return home and remain indoors. His efforts are, however, met with resistance from an official who dismisses his warnings, asserting that “nothing has happened” and that they will proceed with the 20 wedding ceremonies scheduled for that day. Later, during the initial evacuation procedures, the doctor notices Party representatives in the distance and raises his voice to address them, but he is subsequently forcibly taken onto a plane and transported out of the Zone.

This theme is also found in the storyline associated with the film's protagonist, Aleksandr Zhuravlyov, a journalist based in Kyiv, who becomes nuclear accident from his wife, who receives the news from the informant Shurik, whom Zhuravlyov suspects is his wife's lover. When Zhuravlyov raises the question with the editor-in-chief of his newspaper, he is scorned: leaking the news through the press is not an option. His pride wounded by having to rely on Shurik's information, Zhuravlyov remains in Kyiv with his family until the two men finally meet at a dinner party and Shurik informs Zhuravlyov that Kyiv will soon be sealed: “You are in a mousetrap”, he tells Zhuravlyov. Finally, acknowledging the danger of the situation, Zhuravlyov agrees that his wife and son will leave Kyiv with Shurik, while he departs as a volunteer liquidator for the contaminated area.

The concept of the city of Pryp'iat' as a trap recurs in the 2011 Russian film *V subbotu* by Aleksandr Mindadze. Set in 1986 (the title derives from the fact that the film's action begins on Saturday 26 April 1986, the day of the disaster), Mindadze's film is explicit in its denunciation of the Soviet authorities, adopting an approach that had never previously been seen in Russian cinema, and which has not recurred in Russian productions about Chernobyl of recent years. The protagonist Valerij, a member of the Komsomol, accidentally learns from his superiors about the disaster at the power station. Discovered eavesdropping on the secret conversation of Party officials inside the power plant, he is forcibly taken to reactor four by the skeptical Malovichko, the secretary of the regional committee. Once there, the two observe in horror the building destroyed by the explosion. Following a fight between them, Valerij manages to escape, while Malovichko is doomed to die in the radioactive wreckage. The character of Malovichko, arrogant and physically violent, serves as a clear denunciation of those Soviet officials who, following the night of 26 April 1986, refused to act in the face of evidence, and he is therefore condemned by the story's narrative.

Valerij's goal, on the other hand, is to save himself and Vera, the girl he loves, by escaping Pryp'iat' as quickly as possible. Soon, however, they realize the impossibility of this, not so much from a physical point of view, as from an emotion-

al one, again reflecting the attachment theme discussed in the previous section. A minor inconvenience – missing the first train out – leads them to temporarily give up the idea of fleeing, but they eventually end up finding every opportunity to stay and remain close to their friends and loved ones in the city's last days. For some inexplicable reason, in his multiple unsuccessful attempts to run away, Valerij always ends up right in front of the power plant, conveying a feeling of the city as a labyrinth from which is impossible to escape, as well reflecting the character's emotional state.

In an interview after the film's release, the director Mindadze described *V subbotu* as a film “not so much about Chernobyl as about the Russian character”, suggesting that it seeks to convey an emotional perspective on the disaster on the part of the Russian population, rather than to offer a fact-based narration of the events (Lindbladh 2012: 117). It is worth noting that Mindadze describes the characters as exclusively “Russian”, ignoring the fact that the film's protagonists, the Chornobyl power plant, and the city of Pryp'iat' are all located on the territory of Ukraine, and thereby removing from the picture – literally – the traumatic experience of both Ukraine and Belarus.

The negative representation of the Soviet authorities is also explicit in the 2019 series *Chernobyl*. Indeed, this theme is evident from the very first episode, where a committee of Soviet officials convenes in the city of Pryp'iat' in the hours immediately following the disaster. It is there that the decision is made to cut telephone lines, so that “misinformation” does not spread outside the city. For the same reason, no one is allowed to leave or to enter Pryp'iat': the citizens are therefore trapped in the CEZ until further notice. While the protagonists of the aforementioned Eastern European productions struggle to take concrete decisions about leaving their homeland, however, the depiction of such an internal battle is absent from *Chernobyl*. While the need to evacuate Pryp'iat' is constantly urged by the main character, Valerij Legasov, the Anglo-American production presents two pivotal scenes in which the people's reaction to this emergency is shown. In the second episode, Ulana Chomyuk, a Belarusian nuclear physicist, immediately travels to the Minsk Communist Party Headquarters, requesting to speak to the deputy secretary to inform him of the danger. Following the latter's refusal to take any action, Chomyuk leaves the office, but not before gifting a packet of iodine pills to the deputy secretary's assistant and advising her to go “as far away from Minsk as possible”. Without hesitation, the woman takes one of the pills and, clearly troubled, ponders what to do. There is no room for sentimentality.

A different attitude is shown in the fourth episode, which describes the liquidation activities of the CEZ. The attachment to the land – represented via the character of an elderly peasant woman, who is eventually forced to evacuate by the militia – is explained through historical motives rather than emotional factors.



The woman refuses to evacuate the Zone, on the grounds that she has lived in her village all her life and neither the Civil War, nor Stalin’s Holodomor, nor the Second World War had succeeded in making her leave. For this reason, she will not leave because of a danger that she “cannot even see”.

### The “invisible enemy”: Visual representations of radioactivity

The world changed. The enemy changed. Death had new faces we had not known yet. Death could not be seen, could not be touched, it did not smell. Even words failed to tell about the people that were afraid of water, earth, flowers, trees. Because nothing like this had ever happened before (Alexievich 217).

The representation of radiation in visual media poses a significant challenge, due to its invisibility. What is so clearly depicted in Svetlana Alexievich’s celebrated 1997 work, *Chernobyl’skaya molitva. Khronika buduschego*, published in English for the first time in 1999 as *Voices from Chernobyl: Chronicle of the future*, through the testimonies of the interviewees – one of which is cited as the epigraph to this section, – is explored in recent films and television series through visual techniques applied both during filming and in post-production devices, in order to convey the dangers of contamination in a tangible way. In this section, the creative devices used to represent radioactivity in the two serials considered in this article, the Ukrainian production *Motyl’ki* and the Anglo-American *Chernobyl*, will be analyzed and compared.

The most frequent technique is the exploitation of framing and close-ups that linger on contaminated objects in the mise-en-scene, from natural to urban elements, exploiting the viewer’s awareness of the danger of radiation exposure, while the characters of the stories are often unaware of it. This approach is evident in *Motyl’ki*. In the first episode, the morning after the Chornobyl reactor explosion, the residents of Pryp’iat’, unaware of the danger, are shown getting on with their lives. The camera focuses on seemingly ordinary actions: bakers unloading bread from a van, a child jumping into a puddle, a newlywed couple posing for photos in the city center. In addition to the camera’s focus on these activities, however, the series employs a visual distortion effect, a “glitch” on the screen that symbolizes the dangerous presence of contamination in the surroundings and the disruption of normality.

In *Chernobyl*, radiation contamination is depicted via the same technique: the camera fixes on details that would otherwise be insignificant. For instance, close-up shots linger on the water being pumped to wash the mud from the rescue trucks, or on the glasses in a night bar from which some residents of Pryp’iat’ drink. This technique emphasizes the pervasiveness of the radioactive particles, which are impossible to detect with the naked eye.

Additionally, both series highlight the fatal consequences of the nuclear accident through the depiction of animals, whose physical reaction to radiation exposure is often quicker and more evident than that of humans. In *Chernobyl*, a bird flying over Pryp'iat' suddenly falls to the ground, unnaturally. Likewise, in a second scene, a close-up lingers on the body of a young deer lying dead in the surrounding forest, as helicopters involved in the rescue operations fly overhead. In the fourth episode of the series, a liquidator is tasked with the job of eliminating animals from the abandoned villages of the CEZ, as they are considered to be dangerous carriers for the radiation. This includes domesticated animals, such as a group of puppies that the young man finds in an abandoned house and cannot bring himself to shoot, leaving the job to his superiors. *Motyl'ki* adds an additional emotional dimension to the effects of radiation exposure on animals, by introducing into the narrative Alya's pet dog, to which she is extremely attached. In an upsetting sequence, the dog dies in Alya's arms and she spends what seems like hours holding onto its dead body, while she waits for Pasha to come and look for her in the shed where she is trapped.

As in *Motyl'ki*, a specific visual device is employed to evoke the presence of radiation in *Chernobyl*. Instead of the screen "glitch", however, slow motion is used on several occasions. This is evident in a scene from the first episode, set on the night of the explosion, in which a group of Pryp'iat' residents gather on what is today popularly known as the "Bridge of Death", about one kilometer from the nuclear power plant, to observe the colors emanating from the fire. A bright blue halo stands out over the plant in the night sky, triggering the following dialogue:

WIFE – What do you think makes the colors?

HUSBAND – It's the fuel, for sure!

WIFE – It's the fuel, for sure! What do you know about it? You clean the floors at a train station!

The color over the Chernobyl plant is not characteristic of radiation, but rather a consequence of the contact of the chemicals with oxygen, described by one of the bystanders as "beautiful". As the group watches in awe, windblown ash from the fire on the reactor falls on them. It is at this moment that the slow-motion technique is used to depict the horror of the situation: the ash falls on the people, on the children playing and dancing in the radioactive rain, on the face of an infant in a stroller. The viewer knows, or at least certainly imagines, that none of the people on the bridge will survive.

In both TV series, the representation of radioactivity is therefore marked by visual elements; however, there is a substantial difference between the two usages. While in *Motyl'ki* the visual representation of radiation is used only once, specifically in the scene set in Pryp'iat' on the morning following the reactor explosion, the *Chernobyl* series repeatedly employs these visual devices across all five epi-

sodes. This consistent usage emphasizes both the immediate danger of radiation contamination and the lasting impact of the radiation, thereby contributing to the series' ongoing sense – discussed in the previous section – that the affected areas must be evacuated urgently. In contrast, after the initial danger warning, *Motyl'ki* transitions toward narrating the romantic relationship between the two main characters, prioritizing instead the emotional component of the tragedy and enabling the film's aforementioned depiction of the CEZ as a place from which it is impossible to separate, due to the protagonists' emotional attachment to their homeland and to each other.

### **A response to the West: the 2021 Russian movie *Chernobyl: Abyss***

Mazin's *Chernobyl* gained widespread global recognition after its release in 2019, becoming one of the highest-rated TV series in history, according to user ratings on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb Charts “Top Rated TV Shows – Top 250 as rated by IMDb Users). It also held the highest rating for the year of its release (IMDb Top 10 New TV Shows of 2019). The international critical reception has been predominantly positive, in particular praising the series for the historical accuracy of its depiction of Soviet life and settings, while criticizing the excessively stereotypical depiction of the Soviet authorities (Braithwaite 154). In Russia, despite its popularity with audiences, the series triggered lively debates as well as strongly negative reactions, such as in the case of the Russian party *Kommunisty Rossii* (Communists of Russia), which formally called for a ban of the series within the country, albeit unsuccessfully (*Kommunisty Rossii' potrebovali zapretit' serial 'Černobyl'*, electronic source).

The undoubted success of the Anglo-American series had a direct impact on the Russian film industry's reaction to the theme, leading to a desire to reclaim the narrative of the tragedy<sup>6</sup>. Although not explicitly positioned by the producers as a response to the series – but certainly received by the public as such – *Chernobyl: Abyss* was made in 2021. Its director, Danila Kozlovskij, had stated his appreciation for the Anglo-American series, expressing at the same time confidence in his own film's ability to hold up against it (Uskov). Nonetheless, in terms of the themes it develops, *Chernobyl: Abyss* turns out to be more a response to the Western product rather than bringing an original narrative, standing out distinctly from the previously analyzed East European productions.

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<sup>6</sup> Multiple magazines and websites refer to the Russian productions released after the Anglo-American *Chernobyl* as the “Russian answer” to the HBO series (see, for example, Gaponova; Burmistrov, Lobkov).

Kozlovskij's movie can be ascribed to the action film genre, where the fate of the Soviet Union is placed in the hands of a single hero, Aleksej Karpushin, played by the director himself. Karpushin takes part in key moments of the rescue operations, from extinguishing the fire on the power plant roof right after the accident, to draining the water under reactor four to prevent further contamination. As stated in the credits, the film is dedicated to all the heroes who took part in the humanitarian effort. Mazin's *Chernobyl* had employed a similar approach two years previously, including the fictional character of the nuclear physicist Ulana Chomyuk as a tribute to all the scientists who worked together to recover the CEZ. However, the difference between these two representative characters, whose function is to glorify the heroes of the catastrophe, is substantial, and it lies in the roles they occupy.

In the case of Chomyuk in Mazin's *Chernobyl*, the character is portrayed with an unambiguous specialization – she is a Belarusian nuclear physicist, who travels from Minsk to Pryp'iat' to offer her skills in the service of disaster containment. Her features are well defined, and the character, although fictional, is made believable through the difficulties she encounters during the development of the narration, however heroic her acts are ultimately shown to be. On the other hand, the role of Karpushin's character in Kozlovskij's film is not so specifically defined, making him a rather symbolic, superhuman figure, devoid of limitations and weaknesses. From firefighter on the reactor roof to liquidator in what was probably the most dangerous operation of the power plant disaster containment, the protagonist performs a series of heroic feats, one after the other, impossible for a single man to achieve in reality.

While one must take into account the fact that the intrinsic characteristics of the two productions are different – *Chernobyl* is a TV series, whose length allows for the development of more detailed narrative subplots; *Chernobyl: Abyss* is a feature film that runs for 136 minutes, – it is clear that the messages they contain are different. In Kozlovskij's movie, Moscow's response to the disaster appears immediate: Karpushin's heroic deeds quickly follow one another under the supervision of the Soviet authorities, leaving the viewer to understand that the central government acted in the best possible way. The initial sealing of the city of Pryp'iat' and the delay in communicating the emergency to the population are completely ignored in the movie script. Furthermore, no relevance is given to holding accountable those who were responsible of the disaster – a key aspect in the Western series – as is evident from the following dialogue between Karpushin and Valerij, one of the liquidators:

KARPUSHIN – Valerij, how come this shit exploded?

VALERIJ – Because of people.

KARPUSHIN – Which people, exactly?

VALERIJ – What difference does it make?

The only antagonist Karpushin has to fight is radiation, which, however, does not seem to affect him as much as the other characters in the film, leading to his death only after he has effectively completed the operation to secure the power plant through a series of dangerous missions, during which several other liquidators perish. By contrast, in the *Chernobyl* series Chomyuk's character encounters major difficulties from the start, as in the previously quoted scene at the Belarusian Party's Headquarters. Her knowledge, as a nuclear physicist, of the radiation's dangers is dismissed by the Party's secretary with a single sentence: “Yes, I used to work in a shoe factory. But now I am in charge”.

### Conclusion

From the analysis of the selected filmography, it is possible to conclude that in the film and TV serial productions of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, the portrayal of the relationship between the victims of the Chornobyl disaster and their territories is markedly different from in the Anglo-American series *Chernobyl*. While *Chernobyl* focuses mainly on the urgency to evacuate the contaminated area, the Eastern European productions portray their main characters' conflicted relationship with the territory affected by the radiation. The reasons for the absence of this struggle in the Anglo-American production can be sought in Lindbladh's 2019 study reinterpreting Berdyaev's writings, which suggests that Eastern European cinematic productions see the Chornobyl catastrophe as an opportunity for personal and collective rebirth rather than just an historical tragedy, in a cyclical, non-linear view of time. In contrast, the series *Chernobyl* follows, according to Lindbladh's interpretation, a traditional Western narrative, presenting the nuclear disaster as a definitive end to both life and hope for reconstruction. This is evident in the series' epilogue, which reports the fate to death, and the destiny of the power plant itself, with the confinement of Reactor 4 through the installation of the *Arka* containment structure in 2017, built to last one hundred years. There are no hopeful messages about the possible revival of the site. The geographic distance of the West from the Chornobyl power plant, even more pronounced considering the fact that the narrative was authored by an American writer/director, perhaps explains why the notion of staying or, more significantly, of returning to the CEZ is not considered.

Attention to the characters' struggle is particularly evident in the Belarusian film productions, where the motif of returning to the CEZ as the only place where it is possible to live, despite the risks, recurs frequently. This visceral attachment to the contaminated territories of Belarus can be sought in the direct consequences of the tragedy, which impacted this country more extensively than any other.

Nevertheless, more recent Eastern European productions, such as the 2011 film *V subbotu* and the 2013 series *Motyl'ki* do pay more attention to the dangers of the nuclear disaster, such as through the repeated attempts of the protagonist of the Russian film to escape from the “radioactive prison” of Pryp’iat’, whose depiction also expresses a strong denunciation of the role of Soviet institutions in the disaster’s response, and the visual representation of radiation in the case of *Motyl'ki*.

Finally, following the world-wide success of the Anglo-American series, new productions emerged in Russia, in an attempt to reappropriate the narrative of the disaster, as exemplified by Danila Kozlovskij’s 2021 film *Chernobyl: Abyss*<sup>7</sup>. On comparing the Western series *Chernobyl* and the Russian film, notable differences emerge in their respective representations of the disaster and the relationship of the main characters with the CEZ. While the Anglo-American series emphasizes the difficulties encountered by the protagonists in their humanitarian efforts in the context of the catastrophe, these difficulties are less pronounced in the Russian film, especially with regard to the Soviet authorities’ response to the incident. A clear demonstration of this substantial difference can be seen in the comparison drawn between the two productions’ symbolic characters, Ulana Chomyuk and Aleksej Karpushin.

The elements identified in Eastern European films and TV productions – including the incorporation of romantic themes and love stories, the critical perspective on the role of the authorities and the visual representation of radioactivity – collectively contribute to elucidating the relationship between the local population of the CEZ and their land. The comparison with the recent Anglo-American TV series highlights that, in the regions most severely affected by the disaster, a strong attachment to the land is shown to remain a central factor. Kozlovskij’s film is, however, an exception to this rule, moving closer to the themes of the Western series made two years earlier, and foregrounding the dynamics of the power plant accident and the heroic efforts of the Chernobyl liquidators, albeit without focusing directly on the responsibilities of the Soviet government for the disaster.

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<sup>7</sup> Besides Kozlovskij’s film, mention should also be made of the 2022 TV series by Aleksej Muradov, also entitled *Chernobyl*, which hints at the involvement of a CIA agent with the disaster.

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