

Deepayan Datta; Arindam Nandi*

“What is the cost of lies?”
Historiography of a Disaster and the Collapse
of the Soviet Metanarrative
in Craig Mazin and Johan Renck's
HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*

Abstract: HBO's five-episode docudrama *Chernobyl* (2019) is an attempt to re-imagine the horrific nuclear explosion of 1986 in Pripyat, and what it was like to live through the catastrophic tragedy. Throughout the extent of the show, the creators are seen attempting to strike a balance between the dramatization required for televisual representation and the effort to maintain historical accuracy. Subsequently, *Chernobyl* successfully portrays (and juxtaposes) two conflicting responses to the disaster of 1986 – the state-sanctioned denial and distortion of the real events incorporated by a series of self-serving officials, and the “personal evaluation” of first-hand witnesses – such as Valery Legasov, Boris Scherbina, and Ulana Khomyuk – configured to establish a counter-narrative to a state-monopolized history. Hence, *Chernobyl* becomes what Agnes Heller calls an ‘evaluative reconstruction’ of the 1986 disaster, making way for a historiographical study. This article will also attempt to illustrate how Craig Mazin and Johan Renck's portrayal of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster opens up the possibility of critiquing the pre-existing unquestionability, and the imagined notions of power and perfection of the Soviet hierarchy, as is represented in the show by a set of corrupt government agents and servicemen working for the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Keywords: *Chernobyl; disaster; dramatization; historiography; evaluative reconstruction; unquestionability; invisibility; Soviet hierarchy.*

Historiography

Craig Mazin and Johan Renck's HBO drama series *Chernobyl*, attempts to dramatically portray the nuclear disaster that occurred at the Chernobyl power

* T.H.K. Jain College, Kolkata; Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, India.

plant in the city of Pripyat on the 26th of April in 1986. Consequently, one of the major points of controversy that remains predominant for the Chernobyl disaster, as for any kind of epistemic reinterpretation of a historical event that takes place through cultural or literary representations, is the question of accuracy or historical legitimacy (Sherlock 3).

Subsequently, therefore, given the nature of the drama, *Chernobyl* can be evaluated in terms of a historical retelling that problematizes the very notions of history, historiography, and the difference that lies between the two. That is, as an adaptation of a real-life tragedy and disaster that had included and impacted millions of people, albeit in varying degrees, across the social and political strata of Soviet Ukraine, *Chernobyl* (2019) moves away from being a narrativized event with a singular universalized perspective, and transforms into a pluralized occurrence that is portrayed as fundamentally multiple, heterogeneous, and hence an incident that remains internally inconsistent.

Extending upon this particular line of argument, this paper will focus specifically on the opposition between the representation of the official account of the Chernobyl tragedy as was sanctioned by the Soviet state apparatus; and the separate first-hand "molecular" (Deleuze & Guattari 11) narratives of the individuals that were directly experiencing the fallouts of the disaster, as is portrayed in Mazin and Renck's HBO drama.

As historiography emphasizes the way in which an event or occurrence is historicized rather than on the particular event itself, our work will perceive the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as an already politicized discourse that cannot be reduced to a linear framework and can only be approached through the lenses of the different individuals and institutions that had a stake, and hence were variously invested in the tragedy and its subsequent medical, environmental, and socio-political symptoms.

The Soviet State Apparatus, its major principles as stated in Mazin and Renck's *Chernobyl* (2019), and its Propagators

The first episode of Mazin and Renck's drama begins with an audio recording of Valery Legasov – one of the prime members of the management committee² that was in charge of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl. The recorded

² Legasov was doctor in Chemistry at Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy. Although his specialty was not in nuclear reactors, he became a key member of the state

voice opens with a refrain and then carries forward into the following:

"What is the cost of lies?" It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth, and content ourselves instead... with stories." ("1:23:45" 00:40 – 01:03)

This negotiation between what constitutes lies and truths later becomes one of the driving forces of both the event of a disaster as well as the drama itself as we traverse into the heart of the catastrophe. In fact, the first major indication of an underlying politics of 'truth and deceit' is given by the creators when, just after the nuclear explosion at the power plant, Zharkov, a senior member of The Pripjat Communist Party Executive Committee is seen underlining the importance of the Soviet State, its sovereignty and its conspiracies and disguises at a meeting in an underground bunker. Retaliating against Petrov, another committee member who rebelliously enquires about the news of 'threatening radiation levels' that might be potentially fatal for the whole town, Zharkov asserts that instead of a mass evacuation the state and the committee should instead opt for a vigilant curfew and subsequently seal off the whole city to contain the spread of information or misinformation.

Hence, from the very beginning, the primary objective of the Soviet state apparatus remains evident: restriction of all fatal and dangerous information to the officers in power. Emphasizing precisely this monopolization of information regarding the Chernobyl explosion, Zharkov states that:

It is my experience that when the people ask questions that are not in their own best interest, they should simply be told to keep their minds on their labour -- and to leave matters of the State to the State. ("1:23:45" 41:55 – 42:14)

This little address is then preceded by a more elaborate commentary on the principles of the Leninist State apparatus. Zharkov says:

commission formed to respond to the Chernobyl disaster and investigate its causes. <https://legasovtapetranslation.blogspot.com/> – a blog dedicated to translating the text that comes from the audio tapes recorded by Legasov also confirms this.

Disaster Discourse: Representations of Catastrophe (II)

For is that not the sole purpose of the apparatus of the State?

From the Central Committee all the way down to each of us in this room-- we represent the perfect expression of the collective will of the Soviet proletariat. Sometimes, we forget. Sometimes, we fall prey to fear. But our faith in Soviet socialism will always be rewarded. Always. The State tells us the situation is not dangerous. Have faith. The State tells us they do not want a panic. Listen well." ("1:23:45" 41:12 - 41:48)

This precedence of the State and the subsequent dehumanization of its individuals is again reiterated when Legasov asks for Gorbachev's permission in a meeting to willingly endanger the lives of the three plant workers who would have to manually open the water tanks that remain half submerged in contaminated water. Gorbachev's answer is quick, nonchalant, and emblematic of the 'matter of the factness' of the Soviet state apparatus:

Comrade Legasov. All victories inevitably come at a cost. Sometimes we count this cost in rubles. Sometimes we count it in lives. ("Please Remain Calm" 53:05 – 53:26)

Secondly, the role of the KGB³ (along with other national security agencies) is depicted in Mazin and Renck's drama as remaining instrumental in the dispensing of Soviet politics, especially through strategies of surveillance and regulation. In the third episode titled *Open Wide, O Earth*, Scherbina reveals to Legasov during a walk that they have been followed by agents of the government ever since they had taken up their investigation at Chernobyl.

Later, when Legasov confronts Charkov the deputy commissioner of the KGB regarding the matter of surveillance and the arrest of Khomyuk after a meeting with Gorbachev and the other central committee members, asking him: "But you are bothering to have your people follow me" he replies:

No, no, it's perfectly understandable. Comrade, I know you've heard the stories about us. When I hear them, even I am shocked. But we're not what people say. Yes, people are following you. People are following those people. And you see them? They follow me. The KGB is a circle of accountability. Nothing more.

³ The main security agency of the Soviet Union.

(“Open Wide, O Earth” 49:00 - 49:30)

Ironically, this politics of accountability is shown throughout the show to be nothing but contributive to an already established discourse of lies, self-interest, corruption, and secret-keeping that both runs the Soviet state as well as undermines and contaminates the soviet social space, as Legasov's impassioned monologue at the end of the trial portrays. After finally revealing the major structural weakness of the Soviet RBMK reactors, exposing that instead of using purely boron control rods the Soviet nuclear stations use graphite⁴ that endangers the whole power plant just because it is a cheaper option, he openly bashes the Soviet policies on national and international security:

I am not the only one who kept this secret. There are many. We were following orders. From the KGB, from the Central Committee. And right now, there are 16 reactors in the Soviet Union with this same fatal flaw. Three of them are still running less than 20 kilometres away... at Chernobyl... I've already trod on dangerous ground. We're on dangerous ground right now.

Because of our secrets and our lies. They are practically what defines us. When the truth offends, we lie and lie until we cannot even remember it's there. But it is still there. Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. And Sooner or later, the debt is paid. (“Vichnaya Pamyat” 53:40 – 54:37)

Legasov, Shcherbina, Khomyuk, and other local narratives.

In the interview given to the British Academy of Film and Television Arts⁵, Craig Mazin is discerned as talking about writing *Chernobyl* and the challenges associated with sourcing a story that comes out of the Soviet Union – a civil society where the State has always attempted to monopolize history and have never allowed the free flow of information. The other side of this restriction, however, is that the number of accounts that have come out of the country regarding Chernobyl, does not always match up to the official Soviet narratives surrounding the disaster.

The series portrays several such counter-narratives, mainly surrounding the three protagonists.

⁴ This flawed reactor design was one of the causes of the Chernobyl accident of 1986.

⁵ Craig Mazin on writing Chernobyl, the HBO/Sky Atlantic Miniseries.

Firstly, Valery Legasov, whose participation had helped restore order after the nuclear accident, was already a national hero at the time of his death. In fact, Legasov's suicide, a day after the second anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, is the starting point of Mazin and Renck's miniseries. It marked the day before the outcomes of the investigation into the causes of the disaster were released to the public. In the series, his recordings end with an attempt to answer these controversies.

Immediately after his inclusion in the committee formed by Gorbachev to manage the accident, Legasov warns the President about the extent of the fatality and the need to evacuate the city of Pripyat. His warnings, however, are met with denial and resistance by Soviet party officials, who despise him for engaging in a conjecture which is in direct contradiction to the official party accounts:

Yes, 3.6 roentgen, which by the way is not the equivalent of one chest x-ray, but rather four hundred chest x-rays. That number's been bothering me for a different reason, though. It's also the maximum reading on low-limit dosimeters. They gave us the number they had, but I think the true number is much, much higher. If I'm right, this fireman was holding the equivalent of four million x-rays. In his hand.

And Gorbachev retorts:

I don't hear any facts at all. All I hear is a man I don't know engaging in conjecture-- in direct contradiction of what has been reported by Party officials. ("Please Remain Calm" 10:40 – 11:20)

Following Legasov's personal account, we discover not only the fatal flaws in the Soviet Nuclear industry that lead to the catastrophe, but also the state's denial and reluctance to either acknowledge it or protect the victims.

Secondly, the role of Boris Shcherbina – who describes himself as a “career party man,” (“Open Wide, O Earth” 08:19) Shcherbina's inclusion in this list is unusual but not surprising. Throughout the course of the five episodes, it is probably Shcherbina whose disillusionment with the notion of power and perfection of the Soviet hierarchy is portrayed most vividly by Mazin and Renck. Initially in line with the party's command line and disciplinarian attitude,

Shcherbina's first report⁶ states that the situation at Chernobyl is "stable" ("Please Remain Calm" 08:51) with an exposure level of 3.6 Roentgen. It is also his ideological subscription to the Soviet state that contributes to his initial antagonism towards Legasov. Shcherbina's position changes when he is ordered to fly to Chernobyl, have a look at the reactor himself and report directly back to Gorbachev. It is found during his visit that the level of exposure is not 3.6 Roentgen as was officially reported by the state-controlled Soviet media, but rather 15,000 Roentgen. The other big blow comes when Legasov reveals the long-term consequence of their visiting Chernobyl after the accident – "We're here and we'll be dead in five years." ("Please Remain Calm" 38:33) A grim reminder of his mortality that changes Shcherbina's position in the controversy permanently.

Thirdly, Ulana Khomyuk, the only protagonist in *Chernobyl* (2019) who is not based on real life but was invented by the creators as a fictional composite⁷ to represent the whole league of scientists who worked alongside Legasov in Chernobyl - many of whom were subjected to denunciation, arrest, and imprisonment for speaking out against the official accounts of events. It is through her investigations at the Moscow hospitals and the public archives, that the crafting of a counter-narrative is made possible inside the show. At the archives, Khomyuk finds that most of the documents are listed as 'Permission Only' and she is denied access – as most of the documents are classified by the state. However, she finds an article written ten years ago, warning about the fatal flaw in the RBMK reactors used by the Soviet Nuclear industry – which ignored the warnings owing to their imagined notions of faultless supremacy. It is Khomyuk's investigations which prove that the accident in Chernobyl was not solely the result of 'criminal mismanagement' by the operators and scientists, but also a result of the systemic negligence of the Soviet state.

The Disaster – the Mechanism, the Symptoms, and the Victims.

In the introduction to their seminal work *Critical Disaster Studies*, Horowitz and Remes argue that the meanings of disasters are socially constructed, and therefore further interrogation into the ideas and events associated with them, is

⁶ There is no official record of this report. It might have been internally circulated among the party officials.

⁷ Composite Characters are melding of one or more people into a single character in works of media adapted from real or fictional narratives.

necessary (Horowitz and Remes 2). This helps one understand its broader political and material significance. This paper has tried to interpret the disaster at Chernobyl following this particular form of argument.

The directors of Chernobyl place the explosion at Reactor No. 4 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant only seven minutes into the very first episode of the series. The explosion is not the entirety of the catastrophe at Chernobyl. The focus of the series is elsewhere in the following questions – What caused the explosion? What follows it? The series, therefore, is a retrospective investigation into both.

The Soviet clarification about the explosion is simple: Chernobyl is solely the result of an “operator error” (“Vichnaya Pamyat” 7:20). When Legasov is sent to testify for the Soviets at Vienna⁸, he is instructed by the state to diplomatically legitimize this distorted history, which is required to ‘satisfy the West’. But the narratives of first-hand witnesses uncover how the Soviet mechanism was responsible for the catastrophe – both before and after the explosion. This paper has already talked about how the protagonists Legasov, Shcherbina and Khomyuk’s investigations expose the state’s disregard for the inherent flaws in the Soviet Nuclear Industry that contribute to this. In the final episode of the series, Legasov lists these flaws in the trial again and dares to talk about the mechanism of secrets and lies which is fundamental to the Soviet state:

“When the truth offends, we lie and lie until we can no longer remember it is even there, but it is still there. Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth.” (“Vichnaya Pamyat” 53:40 – 54:37)

The Soviet priority is depicted by the creators of the show as misplaced from the start. When Victor Bryukanov, Director of the plant first hears about the accident, he does not enquire about the extent of the catastrophe, or the workers that might have been wounded from it. His first question is – *“Who else knows this?”* (“1:23:45” 26:20). He represents the Soviet priority in keeping the extent of the catastrophe a secret, to maintain its image of power and perfection. This

⁸ An International Conference in Vienna held in August 1986 to discuss the major social, health and environmental consequences of the Chernobyl accident. It was organized by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and attended by more than 800 scientists and government officials, and government representatives from Belarus, Ukraine, and The Soviet Union.

misplaced priority further translates into the minimum protective equipment offered to the firefighters, medical personnel, and the other first-responders; and more fatally into the reluctance to evacuate the citizens of Pripyat at once.

The explosion at Chernobyl immediately results in the death of a few ground-level operators of the power plant. Other personnel who suffered horrific radioactive burns are seen dying at the hospital later. Contagion surrounding this exposure results in deaths in the medical workforce. Firefighter Ignatenko's wife, pregnant during the accident, loses her newborn child. There are harrowing scenes of dogs and other pets being shot dead to restrict the spread of contamination.

However, the actual extent of the loss incurred from the catastrophe has never been known, this is owing to the politics of invisibility⁹ that largely surrounds Chernobyl. The explosion released enormous amounts of radioactivity into the environment which had reached Minsk, parts of Sweden, Scandinavia, and Germany within hours of the explosion; but radioactivity in the air cannot be seen; and the actual numbers relating to the level of exposure was never released to the public. The more lethal effects of a nuclear disaster are long-term – and spread across a wide variety of discourses like health, environment, agriculture, economy etc. The series does not contain a dramatic representation of all the long-term effects, but ends with the social and political disavowal of those that had attempted to bring those large-scale symptoms to light.

Conclusions

Chernobyl, thereby, ends in a note that is more pessimistic than hopeful in terms of what lies ahead of both the Soviet citizens that live inside a system that will do everything to escape responsibility, blame, the line of fire, and the oppressive regime of the Soviet state. But the historical consequence of the disaster at Chernobyl and its global recognition eventually became one of the major factors that led to the complete destabilization of the illusion of power that had kept the Soviet state intact, especially during a time and in a world that had slowly started to take up and embrace the two significant anti-socialist poles of Western political thought: capitalism and liberal democracy. And as history ends

⁹ This term is taken from Kuchinskaya, where she discusses the imperceptibility of damages caused by nuclear accidents, which can only be known through constructed representations.

up revealing with the fall of the Soviet in the years following the disaster at Pripyat: no state, nation, or ideological institution can sustain itself for long, if it bases all its validity on an illusion that has lost all its power to legitimize itself within a public discourse that has become increasingly open, dynamic, and globalized beyond all possible scales.

Works Cited:

- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Massumi, B. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Kuchinskaya, O. *The Politics of Invisibility: Public Knowledge about Radiation Health Effects after Chernobyl*. The MIT Press, 2014.
- Mazin, Craig. *On Writing Chernobyl, the HBO/Sky Atlantic Miniseries*. (June 3, 2019). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved September 28, 2022.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY0r1Ln6tkM&ab_channel=BAFTAGuru
- “Open Wide, O Earth”: *Chernobyl*, written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, Season 1, Episode 3, HBO, 2019.
- “Please Remain Calm”: *Chernobyl*, written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, Season 1, Episode 2, HBO, 2019.
- Remes, J. A. C., & Horowitz, A. *Critical Disaster Studies (Critical Studies in Risk and Disaster)*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.
- Sherlock, T. *Myth and Legitimacy in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*. In: *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230604216_1
- “Vichnaya Pamyat”: *Chernobyl*, written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, Season 1, Episode 5, HBO, 2019.
- “1:23:45”: *Chernobyl*, written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, Season 1, Episode 1, HBO, 2019.