

SLOVO

Journal for East European, Central Asian,
and Russian Affairs

Review: *Chernobyl* (2019)

Directed by: Johan Renck

Written by: Craig Mazin

Production companies: HBO, SKY UK, Sister Pictures, The Mighty Mint, Word Games

Running time: 5 episodes, 321 minutes total

Countries: United Kingdom, United States

Language: English

Caden Aloysius Wait

Reed College

One day before the premiere of the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, an article in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* posited that it would ‘introduce a new generation to the horrors of 33 years ago.’¹ It would, of course, be unrealistic to expect flawless historical accuracy from any televised dramatization, particularly one attempting to compress two years into five hours. However, this is something of a different beast; its ambitious marketing and subsequent reception suggest the stakes – that is, the potential to generate misunderstanding – are unusually high. Ultimately, the numerous creative liberties taken by the showrunners amount to a predominantly fictitious account.

Chernobyl’s core emotional dynamic lies in the forging of an unlikely camaraderie between a truth-telling scientist and a devout apparatchik,² Valery Legasov and Boris Shcherbina. What begins as overt antagonism eventually yields a formidable duo,³ uniquely suited to grapple with Soviet mendacity. Across its narrative arc, Legasov and composite character Ulana Khomyuk – scientists par excellence – wield their commitment to Truth with such consistency, humanity, and grace that they captivate the mind and awaken the conscience of an entrenched ideologue, thereby marking the triumph of enlightened reason over the authoritarian *Homo Sovieticus*.

¹ Fred Pearce, ‘The Human Drama of Chernobyl’, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/05/the-human-drama-of-chernobyl/> [accessed 15 April 2024].

² That is, a Soviet party man and professional functionary.

³ Or rather, trio, including the prominently featured albeit thoroughly fictionalized Khomyuk.

It is an appealing story, to be sure – comforting, even –but it simply did not happen. As men, neither Legasov nor Shcherbina were anywhere near as virtuous as their fictionalized counterparts. Before the IAEA in Vienna, Legasov issued mealy-mouthed remarks that toed the party line just enough to avoid prosecution; thus, individual operators, not the architecture and artifice of late-stage empire, were deemed deserving of censure.⁴

This is the rule rather than the exception; the series's foremost relationships, personalities, and chronological threads are all too often invented, misconstrued, or compressed. The main characters, more fictive than factual, lack nuance and complexity, resulting in a simplified array of heroes and villains.

Two egregious examples of the latter can be found in the renderings of deputy chief engineer Anatoly Dyatlov – here, moustachioed and cartoonishly abusive – and plant director Viktor Brukhanov, both of whom are reconstituted wholesale so as to fit the required narrative mould. In truth, Brukhanov was widely regarded as ‘mild-mannered and well-liked’, a far cry from the series's implacable bully.⁵ Upon being confronted with the newly radiant maw of Unit Four, he was rendered mute – and, as the night progressed, ‘his formerly laconic manner sagged into a dejected stupor.’⁶ During and after (the historical) Dyatlov's incarceration, he worked tirelessly toward the disclosure of ‘the design faults of the reactor and the way the accident had been whitewashed by Academician Legasov and the Soviet delegation to the IAEA.’⁷ No matter how convenient these alterations may have been for the sake of the plot, the oversimplification of these men and the series' tacit attribution of blame to human error amount to an eerie reproduction of the logic of the Soviet kangaroo court, where the scapegoats' sentences were doled out in the hopes of publicly concluding the inconvenient matter of the disaster.

That said, HBO's *Chernobyl* is a masterfully crafted horror film of epic scale which promises its viewership – and, for the most part, delivers – an immersive narrative experience of immense contemporary relevance. Its visceral and inhuman soundscapes in particular ensure deliverance into the lair of a wrathful god: that wholly unprecedented circumstance humans had never before encountered and thus could not possibly comprehend. Here, as elsewhere, *Chernobyl* succeeds handily in its portrayal of the chaos and utter absurdity that reigned in the immediate aftermath; this is perhaps its greatest accomplishment.

The series concludes with a slideshow of sorts so as to provide context or even closure. Though a noble intention on its face – indeed, so much remains unsaid about the afterlives of Chernobyl – its contents fail to follow through. Missed opportunities abound: one of the slideshow's few specific anecdotes reads, in part, ‘of the people who watched from the railway bridge, it has been reported that none survived. It is now known as The Bridge of Death’ – the bridge depicted to great dramatic effect in the premiere. Where Craig Mazin – the series's lead writer, creator, and executive producer – heard this remains unclear; what is clear is that the claim remains unsubstantiated.⁸ That the series concludes with such a sensationalized apocryphal tale speaks to the costs incurred by perceived convenience. As is so often the case, many if not most of the convenient retellings would arguably have been more captivating had they been portrayed accurately. In the end, *Chernobyl* obscures more than it reveals.

Bibliography

Higginbotham, Adam. *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020)

Mould, Richard F., *Chernobyl Record: The Definitive History of the Chernobyl Catastrophe* (Institute of Physics Publishing, 2000)

⁴ Richard F. Mould, *Chernobyl Record: The Definitive History of the Chernobyl Catastrophe* (Institute of Physics Publishing, 2000), p. 33 n.15; Adam Higginbotham, *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), p. 266, 275-277.

⁵ Higginbotham, *Midnight*, p. 16, 16-17

⁶ Higginbottom, *Midnight*, p. 96-97, 98

⁷ Higginbottom, *Midnight*, p. 345-346, 346.

⁸ Pearce, ‘Human Drama’.

Pearce, Fred, 'The Human Drama of Chernobyl', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/05/the-human-drama-of-chernobyl/> [accessed 15 April 2024]