

**CHERNOBYL CALLING**



**Narrative, Intermediality  
and Cultural Memory of a Docu-Fiction**

EDITED BY  
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## Table of Contents

ARTICLES	<b>Introduction.</b> Cultural memory and the transmedia semiosphere Nicola <b>Dusi</b> , Charo <b>Lacalle</b>	5
	<b><i>Chernobyl</i>:</b> A miniseries between fiction and reality Giorgio <b>Grignaffini</b>	17
	<b>History, drama, retelling:</b> Intermedial realism in <i>Chernobyl</i> Nicola <b>Dusi</b>	31
	<b><i>Chernobyl</i> reloaded:</b> Renewing disaster fictional narratives through female characters Charo <b>Lacalle</b>	51
	<b>Events that defy storytelling:</b> Narrative and dramaturgical solutions in <i>Chernobyl</i> Paolo <b>Braga</b>	69
	<b>“In these stories, it doesn't matter who the heroes are.”</b> Characters' construction in <i>Chernobyl</i> Andrea <b>Bernardelli</b>	85
	<b><i>Chernobyl</i> and the anthropology of sacrifice</b> Alberto N. <b>García</b>	95
	<b>History, power, and narrative.</b> <i>Chernobyl</i> is still there Federico <b>Montanari</b>	113
	<b><i>Chernobyl</i>:</b> From nuclear disaster to the television series and beyond Antonella <b>Mascio</b>	125
	<b><i>Chernobyl</i>:</b> The cognitive value of multiplot aesthetics in contemporary television Héctor J. <b>Pérez</b>	137
	<b>The ‘lifeworld’ criterion in HBO’s <i>Chernobyl</i>:</b> An approach of the <i>intentio lectoris</i> Ioanna <b>Vovou</b>	151
	<b>Transcending the blurred boundaries of <i>Chernobyl</i></b> Renira <b>Rampazzo Gambarato</b> , Johannes <b>Heuman</b>	161
	BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	183



# History, drama, retelling: Intermedial realism in *Chernobyl*

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BY: Nicola Dusi

*La refiguration effective du temps, devenu ainsi temps humain, par l'entrecroisement de l'histoire et de la fiction*  
(Ricoeur 1985: 264).

## 1. History in TV series: a fictionally created 'probable' past

According to Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics (in *Time and Narrative I*), there is a difference, related to the referentiality of the facts narrated, between fictional and historical narratives. While the fictional story can also be constructed as totally unrelated to the world of our everyday experience, or when it is realistic, it implements a poetic and metaphorical reference, Ricoeur speaks of a "reference by trace" for the historical narration and suggests a "cross-reference" between fiction and historiography (1983: 122, *our translation*).

In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur investigates "The actual refiguration of time, now become human time through the interweaving of history and fiction" (1988 [1985]: 180). Ricoeur considers two ways of "refiguring time" (for the reader) through hybridization. On the one hand, he posits historiography as a narrative that can produce fictional effects with its own codes and strategies of imagination. Speaking about the 'fictionalizing' of history, Ricoeur also addresses recent tragedies such as the Holocaust, and we could extend his ethical reflection to the Chernobyl tragedy: "Horror attaches to events that must *never be forgotten*. It constitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims" (1988 [1985]: 187).

On the other hand, Ricoeur investigates “the historization of fiction” (1988: 189): in the belief pact between the author and the implied reader, it is not a matter of falling into the error of naive realism, which seeks a simulation of the past (that is “a mode of resemblance to the real that places fiction on the same plane as history,” *ibid.*), but to search for the construction of an effective “verisimilitude,” for which Ricoeur quotes Aristotle: “for us to be disposed to believe, the probable must have a relation of verisimilitude to what has been” (1988 [1985]: 191).<sup>1</sup>

In this way, fiction, freed from the constraints of “documentary proof,” can explore the “probable” aspect of an event or action, using imagination to resolve (through free interpretation) unfamiliar or still obscure passages. These are what Ricoeur calls “the imaginative variations of fiction” (1988 [1985]: 192), which bring what he calls an “iconic augmentation” to the historical discourse.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. TV series, referentiality, veridical effects

In post-structuralist semiotics, particularly that of the Greimasian school and, in a different way, also that of Lotman, the external world is thought of as a ‘macrosemiotic,’ within which people and cultures, beliefs, objects or animals and plants live (Greimas and Courtés 1979; Lotman 1990). The referent, the direct world, and the experiential reality are analyzable only as symbolic and discursive constructions or rather as intersemiotic translations between languages and worlds, cultures, and sign systems.

From the perspective of the media semiotics proposed by Ruggero Eugeni (2010), the world represented and referred to in fictional and documentary audiovisual products is always an “indirect world,” which relates more or less strongly to the “direct world” of phenomenological experience. It is precisely this connection that is the problem since there is never an unambiguous and immediate relationship between them but always a layered mediation that is both perceptual and multisensory, narrative, and discursive.

What settles the issue, in my view, is Roger Odin’s semiopragmatic approach (2013), which considers pragmatic differences in the communicative pact and the axis

<sup>1</sup> “It is not when the novel has a *direct* historical or sociological role, combined with its aesthetic role, that it poses the most interesting problem with respect to its verisimilitude. The true *mimesis* of action is to be found in the works of art least concerned with reflecting their epoch. *Imitation, in the usual sense of the term, is here the unparalleled enemy of mimesis.* It is precisely when a work of art breaks with this sort of verisimilitude that it displays its true mimetic function. The quasi-past of the narrative voice is then entirely different from the past of historical consciousness. It is, however identified with the probable in the sense of what might have been. This is the *pastlike* note that resonates in every claim to verisimilitude, outside of any mirroring of the past” (Ricoeur 1988 [1985]: 191).

<sup>2</sup> “If it is true that one of the functions of fiction bound up with history is to free, retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past, it is owing to its quasi-historical character that fiction itself is able, after the fact, to perform its liberating function. The quasi-past of fiction in this way becomes the detector of possibilities buried in the actual past. What ‘might have been’ – the possible in Aristotle’s terms – includes both the potentialities of the ‘real’ past and the ‘unreal’ possibilities of pure fiction” (1988 [1985]: 191-192).

of communication between the audiovisual product and viewers. According to Odin, the documentary reading pact is a framework, an orientation of viewing and media experience whereby we see a documentary film and accept that it concerns us in a different (and direct) way than a fictional story. A *documentary narrative* opens a pact of the questionability of its enunciator concerning the 'truth' and reliability of what is being told, which can be verified or falsified by intersubjective evidence. And a warning: even a *fictional film* can activate a documentary reading, enhancing its verisimilitude by providing circumstantial evidence, testimonies, and historical documents.

Many contemporary TV series play on the boundary of these cross-references and hybridize genres with crossovers in the extratextual reference, the documentary reading, and the fictional story. This hybridization demonstrates that realism is a discursive and cultural construction with different degrees and varying forms of effectiveness, resulting from narrative and interpretive choices as well as from intermedial translations and remediations. Sometimes, as in TV series like *Narcos* (Netflix, Gaumont Television 2015-2016), *Gomorrah* (Sky Italia, Cattleya, Fandango 2014-2021) or *House of Cards* (MRC, Netflix 2013-2018), hybridization between worlds succeeds in enhancing the fiction of the TV series as highly verisimilar, almost as if it were a possible alternative, or parallel, world to the real one (Dusi 2019; Dusi and Grignaffini 2020).

In *Television Studies*, Bruun Vaage (2013: 237) speaks more simply of a "reality check." Considering TV series, a reality check would be that touch of 'reality' given by archival documents used in a work of fiction that "reminds the spectator of the real-life moral and political consequences of his or her engagement." A kind of fact-checking, or rather a textual device for cognitively and affectively orienting the viewer's reactions. From the perspective of a sociosemiotics of media, we are talking about media constructions that punctuate discursive and gendered frames to produce veridical effects.

### 3. Intermedial realism

The persuasive effectiveness of the miniseries *Chernobyl* (HBO-SKY, 2019)<sup>3</sup> comes from its documentary approach (Odin 2013). It is not just about historical accuracy in representing places and people, furnishings, clothing, and technology in the fictional reconstruction of a narrative possible world (Eco 1979). The 'figures' of death from invisible radiation are achieved through a sound design that remixes Geiger counters; the scenes of contaminated urban spaces and forests are based on iconographic sources from photo reports at the disaster site; characters and narrative situations (e.g., the death of the young firefighter) are created using investigative literature of interviews

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<sup>3</sup> The *Chernobyl* miniseries is directed by Johan Renck and written by Craig Mazin, who also serves as creator and executive producer, or show runner.

with survivors and their families as source texts. And after the fictional finale, *Chernobyl* features a long documentary sequence, with photos and archive footage, that offers an ethical and political commentary on the nuclear disaster and its management.

I will call ‘intermedial realism’ the result of the textual construction of the realistic effects considered together with the finale’s intermedial montage. It means thinking of a world constantly remediated between transparency or hypermediation effects (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Pethö 2009) or, according to Christopher Rowe, who draws on Deleuze, of an “intermedial void” that “expresses the profoundly fractured and mediated reality of contemporary life” (2017: 209).<sup>4</sup> From a sociosemiotic perspective, those mechanisms are all translational, and the fiction-nonfiction distinction is problematic because these media products often exhibit graduality and overlap genre boundaries. Furthermore, referentiality is never given as absolute because it is discursively and narratively intertwined in intertextual, intermedial, and transmedial ways.

Hence, ‘intermedial realism’ in contemporary TV series means that the interweaving of media builds the truthfulness or veridical effect linked to historical reality. To construct a media experience for the viewer as verisimilar or realistic means using intermedial fusion and continuous cross-reference between the fictitious and the verisimilar, invention and remix of documentary sources.

So, what does it mean for a TV series like *Chernobyl* to draw on an archive of documentary photographic images and film footage to build its visual coherence and texture, with a precise temporality, spatially and historically related to the April 1986 nuclear catastrophe? In other words, to write the script, construct sets, and provide costumes for the narrative possible world of the series, starting from historical documents?

Photographic and audiovisual sources become *source texts* that are copied, translated, and reinterpreted in the new textual project of serial fiction, building similarities and cross-references through a reconstruction of urban and private spaces with their furnishings, objects, and technologies (including telephones and cars) circulating in the possible world of the past. The narrative possible world is figuratively and plastically structured from earlier historically reliable texts. We will thus find architecture, interiors, streets and buildings, and spatial situations in a historical-social-cultural context, recognizable in broad strokes for those who have not experienced it (today’s viewers), comparable in detail for those who know it first-hand from direct experience or, more efficiently, comparable for those who have ‘already seen it’: that is, have already experienced it through films and photos of the time (in a sort of “pre-mediation,” according to Grusin 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> “Intermedial realism suggests that ‘this world’ can no longer be defined without making recourse to the audiovisual media that structure our perceptual and affective apprehension of it, and to the transformations these media effect on sensation itself. A new and necessary mode of realism [...] is thus uncovered by an intermedial cinema that expresses the profoundly fractured and mediated reality of contemporary life” (Rowe 2017: 209).

Because of the ‘accuracy’ exhibited by the fictional story, but mainly because of the fierce criticism of the Soviet handling of the nuclear disaster by an American television series, *Chernobyl* has generated, among other things, the so-called *forensic fandom* (Mittell 2015) of curious and critical viewers who search for old footage and photos online to compare them with scenes from the series. Fans and prosumers argue online whether the work done by set, costume, and sound designers is true or false. They even produce interviews and video essays to glorify the work's seriousness or de-legitimize it. This fandom triggered by the *Chernobyl* series also draws on paratextual top-down materials, such as the series discussion podcasts that circulated immediately after the airing of TV episodes, featuring interviews with the showrunner Craig Mazin, who is also the author of the script.

#### 4. Retelling

In the HBO podcast,<sup>5</sup> Mazin stresses the accuracy of historical reconstruction for what he calls a *docu-drama*, a “dramatic retelling of history.” These three words – ‘history,’ ‘drama,’ and ‘retelling’ – condense the problems the *Chernobyl* series poses. Mazin says that he would have liked to shoot directly in Chernobyl if there had been no Exclusion Zone (for radiation). Instead, they shot primarily “in Lithuania and a little bit in Ukraine,” finding a town with the same Soviet-era concrete buildings as Prypiat. At the same time, a decommissioned Lithuanian power plant was reconstructed as a set like the one in Chernobyl, using visual effects to enhance the similarities.

Mazin, the production and costume designer, “became obsessed in showing things as they were [...] the ‘Sovietness’ of things, the Soviet specificity of things.” They checked historical photos and blueprints to build the set, costumes (uniforms, helmets, work suits, clothes, and furniture), and ordinary and technological objects (the control room and nuclear power plant are accurately reconstructed). This accuracy “is a sign of respect,” Mazin claims, toward the thousands of people involved in the disaster, to show to the witnesses or to the hundreds of relatives of the victims that we cared about “telling the truth” (Craig Mazin seems to have read Ricoeur, out of respect for the victims' story). But then he clarifies, “there are a number of things here that are absolutely accurate history and some things that I had to change to be able to tell the story.” For example, the suicide of the main

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Mazin in the first episode of *The Chernobyl Podcast* (Sagal 2019), May/June. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/show/5SSYyVWm0FaY8as96gE3EM>. The promotional and commentary podcast is directed by Peter Sagal, produced by HBO and Sky, distributed by HBO International (cable TV and streaming as HBO Nordic, HBO Go, HBO Max).

character, Legasov, and his secretly recorded tapes to denounce the regime are real, but the way he got them out of his house is an invention of the story.<sup>6</sup>

In the podcast, Mazin introduces a gradualness and a kind of classification that appears very useful in semiotic terms, distinguishing four modes of reconstruction in relation to historical sources: that which is done ‘accurately,’ that which stands ‘a little bit sideways,’ the narrative elements (e.g., actions and characters) that have been ‘compressed,’ and those that have been totally ‘changed.’<sup>7</sup> We could hypothesize logical relations placed in a semiotic square, related to these considerations by the screenwriter and showrunner of *Chernobyl*, and perhaps also applying them to other audiovisual products that retell and rework historical figures. Thus, we are not dealing with amorphous reality but with translative relations between a fictional representation aiming at historical verisimilitude and a semiosphere (or ecosystem) composed of many mismatched historical sources, to a greater or lesser extent verifiable and reliable.<sup>8</sup> The translational and interpretive relationship is semantically organized by the continuity with the historical sources (we can talk here of a complex term like ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ or think of a documentary communicative pact) and the *discontinuity* with the sources (we can call it ‘invention’ or ‘fiction’ or think of a fictional communicative pact);<sup>9</sup> in this tension, we could put at least two conflicting semantic pairs.

(A) *the accurate reconstruction* Vs. (B) *the reconstruction that radically changes and transforms*

(not B) *the reconstruction in which events, actions, and characters in the historical narrative are compressed or displaced* Vs. (not A) *the fictional reconstruction that invents but parallels the directions given by the sources*

While the promotion of the series and many critical articles praise its accuracy, the lengthy podcasts commenting on each episode do not forget to explain what was left out: first and foremost, Russian as the speaking language, opting for only English spoken with no Russian accents (although Cyrillic appears on all writing media inserted in the story); also, the family of the protagonist Legasov (who had a wife and children)

<sup>6</sup> For more details on the building of characters in scriptwriting, see the essay by Paolo Braga in this book.

<sup>7</sup> Mazin claims: “we had a chance to set a record straight about: what we do that is very accurate; what we do that is a little bit sideways to it; what we do compressed or changed”.

<sup>8</sup> The documentary ecosystem or semiosphere related to the Chernobyl disaster includes direct visual and audiovisual sources such as photographs or film footage from the time or other footage including television reportage shows, but also later interviews with direct witnesses, whether journalistic or investigative literature, or indirect sources such as later scientific articles and historical or more popular books. In a broader ecosystem we would also have to consider all fictional films dedicated to the Chernobyl tragedy (Lindbladh 2019) and every fictional or non-fictional media product whether paratextual or not.

<sup>9</sup> To explore the problem of “continuity – discontinuity” between reality and fiction, see Giorgio Grignaffini’s proposal about the miniseries genre in this book.

was cut out completely, and he appears as a lonely hero,<sup>10</sup> initially complicit with the Soviet system, then argumentative and finally defiant but lucidly critical.

Instead, some testimonies, such as those collected in Svetlana Alexievich's book *Chernobyl Prayer: Voices from Chernobyl* (2005), as we shall see, were accurately captured, and the screenplay also uses accounts of scientists who were with Legasov and wrote books about the accident, even re-enacting some dialogues that have actually taken place in the control room, such as the denial of what was happening by Deputy Chief Engineer Anatoly Dhyalov. Immediately after the explosion, this character denies the evidence and downplays the severity of the accident by shifting it to other areas of the nuclear plant. The TV series production uses historical sources, even for how firefighters were initially sent to put out a simple rooftop fire and that many were not adequately equipped.

By contrast, some elements are compressed or shifted chronologically. Mazin explains that all the people in the control room featured in the TV series with their first and last names were actually there, but some were left out of the narrative. We also know from the intertitles of the final documentary sequence that the invention of the figure of the female nuclear physicist scientist, who helps Legasov in the series, is the result of the choice to compress and roll into a single character the many scientists, both men and women, who were part of Legasov's team and who, in turn, denounced the acts of falsification and were persecuted by the Soviet regime for it.

## 5. Controversy and fake news

However, this claim to accuracy, and especially the explicit attack on Soviet disinformation policy at the time of the disaster, is not without controversial consequences. One can easily find on the web a YouTube video interview striving to prove the unfoundedness of many passages in the series. The video, titled *Chernobyl Doctor Fact Checks the HBO Series*, was released on Vanity Fair's website in 2019. A Ukrainian woman doctor, who claims to have worked in a hospital in Kiev at the time of the nuclear power plant accident, explains in excellent English how the audiovisual reconstruction of death from "acute radiation syndrome" is inaccurate and unscientific. In her opinion, the miniseries uses 'zombie movie' horror tones. Even the way radioactive patients are treated seems the result of unscientific bias, as she explains that a washed body whose contaminated clothes have been removed is not contagious to others.

However, an authoritative source such as the investigative book by Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich (2005), used by the miniseries, contains the account of the

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<sup>10</sup> Or better a "sacrificial hero" according to Alberto N. García in this book.

firefighter's young wife who gives a detailed testimony of her husband's gradual death by body disintegration. Who should we believe? The interviewed doctor seems to be in good faith. Indeed, she acknowledges the lack of any scientific training of Soviet doctors at the time of the nuclear accident on radiation damage and recalls that every book on the subject had even been expunged from the university library. That is perhaps the point: the fireman's wife claims that, like her, no one had ever known anything about nuclear radiation, and at first, everyone (even in the hospital) treated the sick as if they were burn victims. So, while keeping the prejudice about body contagion alive in the viewer's mind, the TV series does nothing more than restore the knowledge of the time in the Soviet context.

A more serious accusation is made by a very long article that polemicizes right from the title, *How Accurate is Chernobyl? True Story is Far Cry from HBO Miniseries*.<sup>11</sup> The anonymous journalist's bombastic rhetoric introduces his or her version by saying, "What we know from a simple fact check is that..." or by quoting sources such as *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* by Adam Higginbotham (released in 2019, perhaps following the success of the HBO series). Among the inaccuracies detected, the article claims that Legasov was not only not an expert on the type of reactors at Chernobyl (something easily disproved by comparing scientific sources, even though it is true that he was not a nuclear physicist) but also that he never played any part in the trial over the accident. Yet, in the series, the trial is featured in an extended final sequence in the fifth episode. This sequence glorifies the character of Legasov, who decides to denounce the real reasons for the accident, losing all his privileges as a result. His role here is also very didactic for the audience because, through it, the dynamics of the accident and the causes of the reactor's explosion are simplified (Laugier 2019). In the fifth episode of the podcast, the showrunner Mazin clarifies that, in fact, Legasov was not present at the actual trial and calls it an "enormous dramatic license" made out of narrative necessity. A trial lasting for weeks in real life is reduced to a few key scenes, using the main character to conclude Legasov's story by dramatizing the choices he made in real life in a different context.

We should recall that the series opens with Legasov's suicide, after recording tapes on which he recounts his entire handling of the accident and its causes, tapes that - we are told in the finale - were eventually leaked by Soviet scientists close to him and led the Soviet state to agree to overhaul all reactors like the one at Chernobyl still operating in Russia. According to the anonymous writer of the article, the miniseries makes Legasov a fictional character far removed from the real one to build a 'martyr' and a hero in the tradition of American TV drama (complete with catharsis in the final trial). Again, who should we believe?

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<sup>11</sup> Read on May 2022 on the website: [www.HistoryvsHollywood.com](http://www.HistoryvsHollywood.com).

In real life, Legasov not only committed suicide two years after the Chernobyl accident but left behind a lengthy article of denunciation that was published in *Pravda* after his death and translated into English in a 2000 scientific volume. Opinions about the mythologized construction of the character in the TV series, therefore, while acceptable in terms of the rhetorical construction of a hero of the story, appear as clever *fake news*, perhaps one of the products of Russian propaganda against the American series.

There are also those who, instead, work to confirm the accuracy of the series' figurative choices, for example, the leading video essayist Thomas Flight, who made a video with professional editing (by MUBI production) comparing scenes from the series and footage from the time, though without stating the sources.<sup>12</sup> Controversial stances, denials, fake news, comparisons: it seems interesting to me that a docu-drama can trigger all these social discourses of verification or delegitimization, proving that contemporary television productions have to deal with audiences that can be very critical in their forms of appropriation, resistance, and participation (Jenkins 2006).

## 6. The assemblage of memory

I want to set aside the controversy and point out that what the *Chernobyl* miniseries produces is a compelling narrative, tied to the narrative logic of dramatization, with suspense climaxes and relaxing moments, and with the use of cliffhangers at the end of each episode, given that it is delivered weekly on such an important TV channel as HBO. But as I said earlier, it is also a narrative with a documentary aim, thus with operations of reworking and transformation concerning the historical elements and memory of the catastrophe, which has been selected and collected from books, photographs, and films. Speaking of the relationship between history and memory, I recall Didi-Huberman's position (in his *L'Image survivante*):

Memory is an editing machine: it connects heterogeneous elements (<details>), it digs faults in the continuum of history (<intervals>) in order to create, among all this, circulations [...] All memory phenomena present themselves as entanglements – of fields, of meaning, of times. [...] This means that differences – and the polarities, even the contradictions they presuppose – release [intervals] in which one can detect the transition, the possible conversion from one order of reality to another. (Didi-Huberman 2002: 460-461, *our translation*)

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<sup>12</sup> *Chernobyl Show vs Reality - Footage Comparison* - June 2019 on MUBI.

Didi-Huberman is talking here about Aby Warburg's Atlas, that is, the *Mnemosyne* project, but it can be applied to our case study as well. First, memory as montage: I will explain later what it means to speak of intermedial montage. In *Chernobyl*, this comparison is made between the fictional episodes and the long final documentary sequence, to which I will return in the conclusions. Then, the idea of 'entanglement': for the *Chernobyl* miniseries, we speak of a docu-drama, that is, a textual hybrid (as defined by Giorgio Grignaffini in this book): it is, in fact, neither a drama nor a documentary, but a fusion of two very different strains.

*Chernobyl* mixes the dramatic narrative form and the construction of a documentary mode, which seeks to deliver to the viewer a media product based on reliable sources. We thus have a hybrid genre that, while paying attention to the logic of the main historical facts (the dynamics of the accident, Legasov's posthumous denunciation and his suicide), can nevertheless afford to invent and fictitiously recreate situations, dialogues, and even the actions of the main characters, for narrative effectiveness. Didi-Huberman's proposals suggest that between reality and fiction, or rather, between the fictional communicative pact and the documentary communicative pact (as Odin calls it), "contradictions" can also be played out, allowing "the possible conversion from one order of reality to another" (ibid.).

Thus, the docu-drama of the *Chernobyl* miniseries plays with the "fractures of history," the "texture of memory holes" (ibid.: 464), by activating a logic of intermedial editing, where the interval between the said and the unsaid and the gap from verisimilitude also counts, to highlight the archaeological layers of which our cultural memory is made, to reactivate them in the relation (which can also be conflictual) between historical reality and the re-figuration of fiction.<sup>13</sup> This happens precisely because external paratexts such as the series podcast enable us to observe it critically. Still, it happens even more explicitly and inside the media product in the relationship between the fictional ending and the long intermedial and documentary closing sequence of the series. I will return to that for my conclusions.

## 7. Photographic sources

To better explain what we mean by 'intermedial realism,' let us consider the first photographs taken the day after the Chernobyl reactor's explosion by Ukrainian reporter Igor Kostin (along with some taken on his visits in the months and years afterward) and the photographs by Canadian Robert Polidori taken in 2001 (Komska 2019: 1377).

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<sup>13</sup> See on these aspects the article by Gambarato, Heuman and Lindberg (2022) and the contribution by Gambarato and Heuman in this book.

Kostin took photos from a helicopter flying over the nuclear power plant and frontal photographs of firefighters, soldiers, and technicians at work at the disaster sites. Polidori focuses on the interiors of empty and devastated homes and schools, in which the passing of time has not affected the bleak truth of the spaces and the abandoned objects of daily life. Some of these photos feature in the editing of the final documentary sequence, while others are the basis of the series for silent scenes of explorations of the emptied spaces of the city after the forced exodus of the population. Though discursive constructions, even in Polidori's case with an aesthetic aim, these photographs become visual documents on which the set and costume designers rely for the fictional recreation of the figurative world of the series to create a setting resembling a Soviet cityscape of 1986, with its devastation by blast and radiation. The fictional world thus translates a reality mediated by photography; in other words, the first discursive construction of photographs, layered between levels of perceptions and sensations, narrative and enunciative mediation (following Eugeni 2010), is used as a set of instructions to build a different media experience, which in turn is layered between perception and sensations, narrative and enunciative strategies. A translation and reinterpretation in which the historical source becomes a matrix of invariance.

We could also speak of 'grafts,' that is narrative situations that reconstruct an event from its documentation, using it as an iconographic and figurative frame of reference (Dinoi 2008; Taviani 2007). The series' realism constructs a way of questioning the experience of the Soviet world of the 1980s with a hermeneutic gaze concerning the traces of the extra-textual historical world gathered from the photographic medium.<sup>14</sup>

## 8. A literary source: *Chernobyl Prayer*

As suggested earlier, one of the sources not cited in the credits yet repeatedly mentioned in the podcast in connection to Mazin's portrayal of the young firefighter's death from radiation poisoning is the collection of survivors' testimonies that make up the book *Chernobyl Prayer: Voices from Chernobyl* by Svetlana Alexievich (2005). The account of the young firefighter's wife, from whom one of the lead roles of the series is carved out (as Charo Lacalle in this book reminds us), opens Alexievich's volume with a full twenty-one-page long testimony. She traces the catastrophe from the moment immediately after the explosion, which occurred in the middle of the night, saying of

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<sup>14</sup> Among scholars of transmedia worlds, Ryan would say that they are "inter-universe relations", to explain "the resemblances between the actual world and the world projected by a fiction text", resemblances which in turn "influence its accessibility" (Ryan 1991: 5). In media studies, Bruun Vaage would probably call *Chernobyl* a "socially realistic fiction" that "will be evaluated with regard to its truthfulness and standards of evidence for making such claims about the real world" (Bruun Vaage 2013: 232).

the firemen: “They weren't wearing their canvas gear. They went off just as they were, in their shirt sleeves. No one told them. They had been called for a fire, that was it” (Alexievich 2005: 17).<sup>15</sup> And regarding the firefighter's death, here is the account of his gradual, very painful, death by decomposition, through the gradual disintegration of his sick body, with stages described as sudden:

He started to change; every day, I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his tongue, his cheeks - at first, there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers – as a white film... the color of his face... his body... blue, red, grey-brown. [...] The only thing that saved me was, it happened so fast [...] It was a hospital for people with serious radiation poisoning. Fourteen days. In 14 days a person dies. (Alexievich 2005: 24)

The disease manifests itself through sudden transformations in the shape and color of the body (the “body-involucre” according to Fontanille 2004), while the internal organs (the ‘flesh’) decompose or come out of the mouth in bits.

In the series, this description is intersemiotically translated very pointedly in the extended scene, accused by some critics of having horror fiction overtones, in which we witness the firefighter's death. The choice to narrate this particular death in the miniseries lies perhaps in the power of an exemplary (and documented) case, combined with a tender and sensitive love story, as a way to simultaneously remember the victims of Chernobyl and their families and to thematize the sacrifice of thousands of people who served to stem the catastrophe.

In the literary account, the funeral is very quick, and the woman, with her husband's parents, are the only witnesses:

No one was allowed in. It was just us. They covered him with earth in a minute. “Faster! Faster!” the officer was yelling. They didn't even let me hug the coffin. (Alexievich 2005: 32)

The witness account also mentions “slabs of concrete” in the pit, which help shield against radiation. The fiction production dwells instead on the funeral of the young firefighters who died from radiation, with their wives at the cemetery in front of the mass grave, while the images are accompanied by lyrical and sad choral music. In the

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<sup>15</sup> We are quoting from S. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl. The oral history of a nuclear disaster*, translated by Keith Gessen, New York: Picador, 2006.

burial scene, a truck arrives in the cemetery: it is a cement mixer that begins unloading fresh cement onto the zinc coffins. The end of the sequence (which also closes the episode) alternates shots of the dripping concrete with a detail of the face of the young woman, who is holding back tears: we watch (in slow motion) the filling of the pit with the thick, grey liquid, which first encircles then slowly submerges the coffins.

This figure of the flow of concrete becomes a key isotopy in the series. It is helpful to recall, in this regard, Ricoeur's remarks on the "metaphorical reference" (Ricoeur 1983). The slow flow of the grey concrete that covers everything appears, in fact, as a good metaphor for the strategy of the Soviet Union narrated by the miniseries concerning the nuclear accident – not telling and lying, deception and concealment, attempting to make inviolable the secret related to the disaster and to construct an official truth that reassures public opinion, making the surface as smooth as a tombstone slab.

## 9. Figures of the invisible death: sound design

Some figures give material form to the invisible threat of radioactivity to our gaze as viewers: not only trivially, through the hands of meters and detectors, but more powerfully through some of the images on which the camera lingers. For example, a bird falls dead to the ground suddenly, just after a group of children pass by on their way home from school. Or a dead deer, half burned by radiation in the woods near the nuclear power plant. And again, more cruelly because it is implied: in the first phase of the explosion, radioactive ash falls copiously on the faces and hair of the small families gathered on a bridge from which they can watch what everyone thinks is a harmless fire.

But from the very beginning of the catastrophe, close attention must be paid to the use of music or sound design. The soundtrack (composed by Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir) creates moments of lyricism aimed at emphasizing (with classical music or choral and vocal arrangements) the heroism or desperate attempt by some characters to stem the damage and alternates these with a less perceptible but often present background sound composed of mild distortions and broken tones: a kind of background buzz taken up (and remixed) by the noise of Geiger counters for radiation. It's a sonic continuum of rarefaction and swarming, constantly commenting on human situations and bleak images of lifeless worlds among emptied buildings, classrooms full of books and rubble on desolate desks, and deserted streets: a visual power that comes from the audiovisual remake or rework of the reportage photos by Igor Kostin (for the Novosti Press Agency in Kiev), and the more recent ones by Polidori. The pervasive noise of Geiger counters is a purely aural dysphoric enhancement, metaphorizing the silent and inexorable poisoning of places and people, of buildings and objects and animals, affected by something invisible, pervasive, and yet - in this mode – 'noticeable,' that is, audibly perceptible by the viewer.

## 10. The fictional ending

Immediately raising the dramatic tension, the series challenges the viewer from just a few minutes after the beginning: the main character is introduced and, shortly after that, commits suicide, and we will not find him again until the end of the first episode.

The opening of the first episode of *Chernobyl* gives the viewer an anticipation of the protagonist's suicide, which will only become apparent in the fifth and final episode. Telling by starting with a "prolepsis" (Genette 1966), i.e., a distressing and effective flash-forward that takes us two years ahead of the series finale, forces the viewer to immediately understand the extent of the nuclear scientist's lucid despair and to shift the focus to the totality of the factors being told, rather than to the twists and turns in the individual character's story. It is also a way of giving a kind of ethical shield to the protagonist (Bernardelli 2016), exempting us from worrying about his fate (Smith 1995).<sup>16</sup>

The choice of suicide is echoed in the documentary part of the series finale: the comments of the written intertitles emphasize how this death, for the real Valery Legasov, achieved the effect of enhancing the importance of the tapes he recorded, containing his scientific and political analysis of the reasons for and the extent of the nuclear disaster with a denunciation of the censorship tactics of the Soviet leadership. We learn that Legasov's words will be crucial in keeping the scientists' demands alive with respect to securing other similar power plants in the USSR.

Let's go back and view the incipit of the series after watching the sequence that we will call the 'fictional ending' of the story. Everything seems to arise from a later editing strategy, played on continuity and chiasmus between incipit and ending. There is the link of the protagonist's voice off recording his tapes, which in the incipit seems to answer (in advance) the questions that the same voice off will ask through the recorded confession we will hear in the fictional ending.

In the fifth and final episode of *Chernobyl*, after the public trial and Legasov's revelations accusing the Soviet state of keeping silent about the problems of nuclear reactors of that model, the head of the KGB informs him that from now on his social and professional life will be reset to zero. The episode's ending is silent: Legasov is escorted out of the building where the trial took place and taken away. Before getting into the car, there is one last parting glance between him, the scientist's friend, and the politician he defended against all charges. The camera frames Legasov from below and to the side, inside the car: his head droops weakly as if a weight has been lifted. Now, the vision becomes aerial: in a very long shot, we see the black car racing along a road out of Chernobyl through tenements and woods, which we know are contaminated and lost. In voice off, the voice of the character recordings, Legasov takes leave of the viewer with some final words:

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<sup>16</sup> See also the chapter by Andrea Bernardelli in this book.

To be a scientist is to be naïve. We are so focused on our search for truth, we fail to consider how few actually want us to find it. But it is always there, whether we see it or not, whether we choose to or not. The truth does not care about our needs or wants, it doesn't care about our governments, our ideologies, our religions. It will lie in wait for all time. And this, at last, is the gift of Chernobyl. Where once I fear the cost of truth, now I only ask: what is the cost of lies?

Just before the final question, the image fades into a black cut-off that lasts a few seconds, accompanied by a somber background buzz that we now recognize as the noise of radiation. It is the story's conclusion, marked by an explicit threshold of suspension since we already know what the character's bitter end will be from the first images of the first episode. But it is not, yet, the miniseries finale.

## 11. The miniseries finale

The discourse expands, moving out of the 'fictional' pact and into the 'documentary' one (Odin 2013). After the black cut, and for a few seconds in sonic overlap with the noise, a sequence of archival materials begins, accompanied by elegiac background music. The musical commentary keeps the affective level high by stitching the images and written comments together with a single soundscape, at once powerful and mournful. We see historical footage of the real Valery Legasov as he talks to students and colleagues and looks towards Chernobyl out an airplane window. At the same time, overlay scripts inform us about the historical fate of the real-life protagonists of the story:

Valery Legasov took his own life at the age of 51 on April 26, 1988, exactly two years after the explosion at Chernobyl. The audio tapes of Legasov's memoirs were circulated among the Soviet scientific community. His suicide made it impossible for them to be ignored. In the aftermath of his death, Soviet officials finally acknowledged the design flaws in the RBMK nuclear reactor. The reactors were retrofitted to prevent any accidents like Chernobyl from happening again.

Over the archival footage of Legasov and a group of researchers arguing or traveling on a bus wearing overalls and masks (that is a famous photo by Igor Kostin), the overlay writing changes from metanarrative to metadiscursive, while earlier fiction gave way to historical narrative, now it is the writing and production mechanism of the miniseries that takes over:

Legasov was aided by dozens of scientists who worked tirelessly alongside him at Chernobyl. Some spoke against the official account of events and were subject to denunciation, arrest, and imprisonment. The character of Ulana Khomyuk was created to represent them all and to honor their dedication and service to truth and humanity.

The enunciation that characterizes the overlay comments marks its impersonality (Metz 1991) as if it were the voice of the series itself: a kind of ‘great enunciator’ or discursive mechanism that sets up the narrative unfolded so far. A speech-taking that begins by using the documentary mode and can now take a further leap forward becomes a reflection on the choices of production, writing, and directing. Actually, it is a reflection that is not only metadiscursive but truly metafilmic. The TV series reflects on itself and enunciates its construction strategies.

Thanks to more photos and new archival footage, we are informed about the fate of the guilty technicians and other characters in the series. Some documentary images show Gorbachev greeting the cheering crowd at a public event. Here, the voice of the miniseries (with the intertitles) comments with an interesting historical-political point:

Mikhail Gorbachev presided over the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. In 2006, he wrote: the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl... was perhaps the true cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The discursive construction of the sequence has thus shifted from giving an account of the extratextual, historical fate of the individual protagonists of the fictional narrative (the nuclear physicist, the politician, the firefighter's wife) to a gradually more collective consideration of the local population and the environment, to the multitude of individuals employed to cope with the radiological emergency on the ground, and finally to an epochal judgment on the tragedy through the Gorbachev quotation. As the documentary narrative progresses, it gradually becomes more critical, for example, with the reporting of rising cases of cancer among children in Ukraine and Belarus and the (unofficial) estimates of deaths from the nuclear accident (“from 4 thousand to 93 thousand deaths”).

The final documentary threshold of the *Chernobyl* series constructs an authoritative narrative that stands as an ethical and political commentary on what happened. Data are introduced as objective elements, in contrast to the ‘official truth’ provided by the former Soviet regime. In effect, it is more than a simple appendix aimed

at demonstrating verisimilitude with historical facts. Elements of evidence-based veracity are introduced, not only through photos and archival footage of the real protagonists but also with forays into the actuality of the landscape or even with a short video shot entering the basement of the Pripyat hospital. They are documentary marks, offering viewers a 'reality check' (Brun Vaage 2013).

The documentary sequence becomes long and elaborate, and the narrative never ends because, in the long minutes that follow and expand the fictional narrative, the very credibility of the production and artistic operation of the miniseries is being reinforced. Thus, if the ending of the fictional narrative remains suspended because it is, in fact, already known thanks to the flashforward with the shock sequence of the protagonist's suicide, the ending of the miniseries is understood as a product of a communicative relationship with the viewer, and becomes an intermedial expansion, creating a second finale. We have defined this simultaneously informational and assertive sequence as 'meta-filmic' and 'meta-discursive': a discursive mechanism of folding and enunciational splitting (Metz 1991), reflecting on the just concluded narrative.

Thus, we have a dual strategy (enunciative and enunciational): on the one hand, the narrative with archival images commented on by the intertitles informs and, at the same time, constructs historical knowledge. On the other hand, it seeks to establish a documentary complicity with the viewer, tending to reset the media filter to bring the discourse to historical and phenomenological life. Of course, it is a discursive construct. Still, it creates a different kind of experience in the viewer: not only 'factual,' more directly related to everyday life (Eugeni 2010), but also, in some way, ethical.

If the documentary mode sets up a discursive pact whereby what is being told "directly concerns me" (Odin 2013), conveying historical-economic as well as biographical and generational knowledge, the 'factual' media experience produced serves the miniseries to attest itself as truthful ('veridical' for Greimas 1983), demonstrating how the fictional narrative is based on intersubjectively verifiable historical sources. Furthermore, the ethical position results from the rhetorical construction that denigrates the use of information in totalitarian regimes.

This is the effect sought by the metadiscursive construction: what we have seen and experienced through the narrative and the fictional characters bends and doubles thanks to the final documentary discourse, which, by placing itself alongside the fictional narrative, makes us reflect on the miniseries and then engage in a powerful criticism of the systematic disinformation constructed by the Soviet Union.

## 12. Conclusions

What happens to the viewer watching the documentary images after the fictional story is over is part of an 'intermedial montage.' We can now define it using Montani's words:

The one who shows [...] becomes involved, reflexively, in the act of showing [...]. The viewer [...] is invited to perform comparative work between the different forms of the audiovisual image. (Montani 2010: 9, *our translation*)

It is also about constructing a reality effect, or rather an 'intermedial realism.' The contrast produces an *authentication effect* because it activates in the viewer a form of "referential performance" (ibid.), which does not act by showing the difference between the image and the world but rather by showing the *relationship between images*, that is, "between the different media components and the different technical formats of the audiovisual image" (Montani 2010: 23-24, *our translation*). In short, there is a transition between "configuration" and "refiguration": Ricoeur (1983) would say that the viewer is led to "re-figure" or "re-configure" the film through the new interpretations proposed (Montani 1999: 50).

To summarize, we have seen how the documentary approach of the series production is based on archival documents such as historical photographs, literary texts, and film footage. At the same time, the pervasiveness of radiation is rendered in the series with the crackling sound of Geiger counters and a soundtrack marked by realism but also metaphorical. The intermedial realism of the *Chernobyl* series is thus given not only by the attention paid to the characters' stories, the sets, and the costumes but also by the interweaving of media that builds 'reality effects.' It is the intermedial fusion of the fictional and the verisimilar, the invented and the documented, which convinces and moves the viewer, constructing an effective media discourse.

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