

CHERNOBYL CALLING



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

EDITED BY
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Introduction. Cultural memory and the transmedia semiosphere

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BY: Nicola Dusi and Charo Lacalle¹

1. *Chernobyl*:² a wake-up call

The miniseries *Chernobyl* (HBO-SKY, 2019), about the disaster that occurred at the nuclear power plant of the same name in 1986, took the viewer back to the horror generated by the largest catastrophe in history caused by the human species to date. Created and written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, *Chernobyl* is a fictionalized account of the causes and consequences of the catastrophe. At a time when the dangers of nuclear power seem to have faded in the wake of concerns about other emerging problems – such as climate change and growing water shortages – the meticulous reconstruction of the tragedy was praised even by the global environmental movement Greenpeace: “This was an event never before seen in the history of mankind, impeccably reproduced for television audiences.”³

The success, with audiences and critics alike, of this mixture of political thriller, catastrophe, and horror film, was absolute from its premiere and corroborated the intermediality of television fiction as well as its capacity to touch the most profound and complex dimensions of our existence (Pallarés-Piquer, Hernández, Castañeda y Osorio 2020). *Chernobyl* also showed fiction’s ability to explore cultural memory through the complexities of globally connected technologies and markets, as well as the impact of media on viewers (Gambarato, Heuman, Johannes and Lindberg 2022).

¹ Although we developed the introduction together, Charo Lacalle wrote the first section and Nicola Dusi the second and third sections. The fourth was written jointly.

² In our book, *Chernobyl* in italics indicates the TV series, while Chernobyl in text typeface refers to the nuclear power plant.

³ See <https://n9.cl/oap40>

After the broadcast of the fifth and final episode of *Chernobyl*, the prestigious site of recommendation resources for quality entertainment, Rotten Tomatoes assigned the miniseries a 97% critics' score while explaining its attractiveness as follows: "*Chernobyl* rivets with a creeping dread that never dissipates, dramatizing a national tragedy with sterling craft and an intelligent dissection of institutional rot."³ *The Guardian* journalist Rebecca Nicholson attributed the miniseries' impact to the unflinching and explicit terror it induced in viewers and emphasized the impossibility of hiding images of burned bodies collapsing in putrid decomposition.⁴ The *Forbes* TV newsletter considered that the show had "cemented itself a place in the larger scope of TV history" by obtaining the highest score for the television series from IMDB viewers.⁵ As for its target, the global data and business intelligence platform Statista situated the audience in the United States at over 1.19 million within the 18 to 49 demographic.⁶ In short, *Chernobyl* not only recalled one of the most tragic episodes in recent history but also aired it worldwide, making it a hit.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its capture of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant – the largest in the world – in March 2022 converted *Chernobyl* into a wake-up call for fear of another explosion. This concern was expressed by the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, after visiting the installations at the end of August of the same year. "It could be a bigger disaster than Chernobyl," warned Carlos Umaña, co-chair of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

In line with the stories about the effects of the Anthropocene — mentioned in different chapters of this book — the miniseries' mixture of fiction and facts in its narrative strategies illustrates the horror of a nightmare from which we can never entirely escape because it could happen again. After all, "Russia effectively is using the plant at Zaporizhzhia as a pre-positioned nuclear weapon to threaten and intimidate not only Ukrainians but millions of Europeans across a dozen countries," wrote the Senior Advisor on Russia and Europe at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Mary Glantz, after the Russian occupation of the nuclear power station.

In summary, *Chernobyl* appeals to us as much as it overwhelms us because we know we are heading toward a point of no return in safeguarding humanity's future.

³ See <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/chernobyl/s01>

⁴ See "Chernobyl: horrifying, masterly television that sears on to your brain". *The Guardian*, 2019, May 29. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/may/29/chernobyl-horrifying-masterful-television-that-sears-on-to-your-brain>

⁵ See Paul Tassi's "Chernobyl' Ends Its HBO Run As The Highest Audience Rated TV Series In History". *Forbes* 2019, June 4. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2019/06/04/chernobyl-ends-its-hbo-run-as-the-highest-audience-rated-tv-series-in-history/?sh=2e4545b16413>.

⁶ See Julia Stoll's "'Chernobyl' Season 1 viewer numbers in the U.S.". 2021, June 13. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1013191/chernobyl-series-viewers/>

We are doing little to prevent future catastrophes, as Toby Ord points out in his influential book *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (2019). According to the Australian philosopher, there is an urgent need to manage today's risks, avoid tomorrow's, and become the kind of society that will never again pose such risks. To this end, Ord calls for allocating resources among projects and organizations, building and sustaining the research community, and developing a strategy.

The reflection on the risks of nuclear energy structures the different contributions of this work, dedicated to the semiotic and mediological analysis of *Chernobyl* from the necessary distance provided by the five years that have elapsed since its premiere.

2. Semiospheres among media ecosystems, intermediality and transmediality

In today's "post-medial atomization" (Eugeni 2010), a rigid methodology is not sufficient to understand the "collective chainings of enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) that constitute the network of discourses, texts, and media connected to a TV miniseries as complex as *Chernobyl*. TV seriality, as *Chernobyl* teaches us, thrives on the intermedial and transmedia relations that are created through the paratexts, the commentaries, the reinterpretations and interpretations that circulate on the web, in the transmedia storytelling of the Western semiosphere (to limit ourselves to this part of the world).

We could argue in terms of a broad and dynamic, extended and time-varying "media ecosystem" (Innocenti, Pescatore and Rosati 2015): a universe containing texts and paratexts, fictional and nonfictional, and media products of different types, from the critical to the more ludic. Concerning the *Chernobyl* miniseries, one should consider not only promotional, paratextual, and commentary texts but every fictional or non-fictional media product, for example, all films dedicated to the Chernobyl tragedy and documentary media products, journalistic reportage, and so on. Speaking of documentary media products related to the Chernobyl disaster, an ecosystem should include, for example, direct visual and audiovisual sources such as photographs or film footage from the time of the disaster or other footage, including television reportage shows and later interviews with direct witnesses, journalistic or investigative literature, or indirect sources such as later scientific articles and historical or more popular books.

We could, however, redefine a media ecosystem semiotically as a sociosemiotic whole in which texts "think about each other" (Landowski 2005; Marrone 2001) or as an open and frayed "life-form" (Fontanille 2015) with vertical logics of coherence between different media objects, comparable with the dynamic relations of Lotman's "semiosphere." Suppose we accept that media products become part of an interpretative and translational chain between texts, discourses, and media. In that case, contemporary media ecosystems are, in fact, coexisting and operating sets of complex and dynamic relationships

between texts, media, and discourses, which produce signification but with very different timescales and ranges of action. Let us think, for instance, of the trailers of a series produced by networks and platforms on the release of a series or for its maintenance on the one hand, and on the other hand of the products of ordinary users, prosumers, or fans who reopen and comment on social media in their communities, or propose reworkings, remixes and mash-ups on video content sharing channels both immediately after the release of the season and in the subsequent years following its evolution.

Understood as part of a “media ecosystem,” the texts, paratexts, and various media objects related to the Chernobyl series become “interconnected structures” with internal and external interactions, able to endure in the long run due to their capacity for “resilience” (Innocenti, Pescatore, and Rosati 2015). If conceived as “life forms” instead, they could be studied as layered media objects, linked by a strong internal coherence, with different “situations grouped in series or homogeneous classes” (Fontanille 2015: 142-143; our translation). Media products become part of a process of reworking, translation, and interpretation over a long period, in which a TV miniseries such as *Chernobyl* is recognized as a “life form” that holds together signs, texts, objects, practices and strategies (from logos to theme songs and opening video incipits, from gadgets to related social discourses). Between production strategies and active consumption tactics, the storyworld of a TV series is thus understood as a complex form of life within a media and cultural ecosystem.

When, on the other hand, we reason in terms of a culturally and historically situated “semiosphere” (Lotman 1990), this system of media discourses produced around a miniseries, of which it is a part while encompassing it, becomes a cohesive and delimited cultural space in which communicative processes take place, information is preserved, and new information is processed. This dynamism is brought about by tensions towards preservation and transformation, as well as between continuity and discontinuity, repetition and difference, innovation and reconfiguration. As regards specifically the case of *Chernobyl*, we could speak of a “transmedia semiosphere.” A term proposed by Saldre and Torop (2012) to refer to the transmigration of content between different media, i.e., transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), and between “text space, media space, and culture space,” because “the space of culture is simultaneously the space of different sign systems (intersemiotic), discursive practices (interdiscursive), and media (intermedial)” (Saldre and Torop 2012: 40). In other words, the episodes of a TV series should be read as matrices of a hybrid or mixed transmedia universe, in which we find reworkings and expansions, negotiations and translations, interpretations and new uses (Dusi 2019).

Therefore, the discussion we open in this book considers the *intermedial* interweaving of footage, allusions, quotations, and translations that the *Chernobyl* series activates, from the writing of the script to the shooting and the postproduction editing. Think, for example, of iconographic sources, literary sources, and historical sources, including written (investigative literature, journalistic reports, historical documents),

visual (photographs, drawings), and audio-visual (footage from the period, interviews, television reports) materials. The comparison and discussion also become a *transmedia* problem, as the series is reopened and discussed weekly (during its airing) through some detailed podcasts by HBO, with interviews with the showrunner Craig Mazin and other members of the production team (Sagal 2019). As Jenkins (2006) argues, this kind of transmedia storytelling features the TV series narration and story world on other platforms, where each medium retells them in the way that suits it best. The transmedia and *crossmedia* products also provide a host of new interpretations, controversies, and discussions about the truthfulness and accuracy of the choices of the *Chernobyl* serial's narrative, which produce new videos, remixes, articles, and statements scrutinizing and discussing the sources and testimonies used in the TV series. Lots of reinterpretations, often critical and highly polemical, are given by web prosumers intent on discussing (even with obviously tendentious purposes) a serial narrative that casts a cold and negative light on the Soviet regime and its manipulative and falsifying handling of the nuclear disaster through the information provided about the catastrophe both as it occurred in 1986 and in the following years. For these reasons, some contributions to the discussion we are presenting will consider intermedial intersections with other media products (other series, films, documentaries, but also novels, documentary photographs, and so forth) on the one hand and, on the other, transmedia and crossmedia overlaps and reinterpretations (through production podcasts, but also the autonomous and grassroots productions of web users).

3. Media memories and archives

A miniseries like *Chernobyl* also teaches us something about the “forms of cultural memory” (Assmann 2011 [1999]), involving the relationship between “storage memory” and “functional memory.” Storage memory preserves at a collective level “the repertoire of alternative options and unexploited opportunities.” In contrast, functional memory “is a memory structured by a process of choice, of connection, of construction of meaning” (Assmann 2011 [1999]: 120). We could, to some extent, say that in the “storage memory,” we find all media, cultural and social products chaotically deposited in the great ‘potential’ archive that is nowadays constituted by the Net: “Library of Babel” (for Borges) or the archive of archives and rhizomatic “encyclopedia” according to Eco (1984). Instead, in “functional memory,” we find media discourses that, like this book, reactivate those memories that are potentially always reopenable, line up discursive and interpretative logics, and organize and actualize those texts in new critical forms, which are still – in their way – narrative. These “activated” and “actualized” memories, to use the terms from Greimas’ narrative semiotics (Greimas 1983), become “functional” memories, which produce “realized” and interconnected media products, such as the miniseries *Chernobyl*, its promotional and investigative podcasts, public and critical commentaries, and so forth.

On the other hand, the *Chernobyl* miniseries, starting from its script, attempts to narrativize historical events, i.e., to use a functional memory and give a reconstruction of the past while allowing itself to dramatize and, where necessary, invent. This process is created by emphasizing certain key questions, made explicit by the series creator Craig Mazin in interviews collected in the podcasts and made into thematic cores of the story, for example: how was it possible to have an accident in a power plant deemed safe by its designers? What happened before, during, and after the explosion, how was the emergency managed, along with its communication, and what political strategies and choices were used to stem the catastrophe initiated? And why, two years later, did one of the people responsible for those choices (Valerij Legasov) kill himself? The miniseries' account of the protagonist's (Legasov) painful choice to secretly record magnetic tapes in which to "tell the truth" about the nuclear accident can also be read as one of the "forms of use" of functional memory as defined by Assmann (2011 [1999]). It is that of becoming a "counter-memory" with a "delegitimizing" function concerning a "power experienced as tyrannical" (Assmann 2011 [1999]: 129) – a system (the Soviet one) that in turn constructed an official memory with the function of "legitimizing power" (ibid.) instead.

These are a few examples underlying the *Chernobyl* miniseries' narrative, thematic, and value mechanisms, which we discuss in this book. After all, the reasoning and suggestions (often interrelated) of the various contributors, opening up different viewpoints and research perspectives on a common media text, bring into play the relations between archives and memory, between latent cultural matters and actual and formed substances, in the enunciative chaining between different semiotic modes of existence.⁷

4. The book's paths

This research stems from a panel discussion that took place at Thessaloniki during the 15th World Semiotics Conference (IASS/ AIS) in August-September 2022 (titled "*Chernobyl* calling. Fiction, Non-fiction, Lifeworld") and briefly summarized for the Jenkins 2022 blog,⁸ whose interventions and discussions were reopened and reworked by the book's authors for collective and extended reflection. In designing the book, we also wanted to open it up to other scholars and researchers interested in analyzing contemporary television seriality and its psychological, social, and semiotic implications and constructions. The *Chernobyl* TV series opens many possible issues, and in this book, we will address some that are part of our research topics. Like many contemporary TV

⁷ See Fontanille and Zilberberg (1988).

⁸ See Dusi, Nicola and Charo Lacalle (2023). Remembering (and Refiguring) Chernobyl: What Can be Learned from the HBO (2019) Series? Pop Junctions, in Henry Jenkins' Blog: <https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2023/1/19/remembering-and-refiguring-chernobyl-what-can-be-learned-from-the-hbo-2019-series>.

series, *Chernobyl* is a case of what Mittell (2015) calls “complex TV.” Analyzing a TV series as an isolated and autonomous media product is no longer sufficient. Of course, it will be essential to understand the miniseries’ choice of discursive genre and format (see the chapter by Giorgio Grignaffini) and to examine the narrative structure of the script (see the chapter by Paolo Braga) and the construction of male (see the chapter by Andrea Bernardelli) and female characters (see the chapter by Charo Lacalle). An equally important task will be to analyze the collision or interplay in the series between its fictional capacity and its documentary aspirations (see the chapter by Nicola Dusi), as is also evident in the miniseries’ finale, where fictional images are replaced by those of iconographic and historical sources. While analyzing the TV series, we will talk about the Chernobyl disaster as a social and cultural trauma and the activation mechanisms of media archives (see the chapter by Antonella Mascio) and about the TV series and the elements of modern sacrifice (see the chapter by Alberto N. García), as well as about the representation of the Cold War and the manipulation of information (see the chapter by Federico Montanari). All this without forgetting ‘traditional’ viewers and their reactions, for example, in a particular local setting such as Greece (in Europe), verifying with qualitative sociological analysis (interviews) the reception and understanding of the TV series’ narrative (see the chapter by Ioanna Vovou).

As can be gathered from these first remarks, we decided to approach the *Chernobyl* miniseries from different theoretical and methodological perspectives to raise issues such as the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, realism constructed through intermedial and transmedia relations, the writing of narrative arcs and the construction of characters in a multi-strand series, with several parallel stories (see the chapter on Héctor J. Pérez). According to Gambarato and Heuman (2022), exceptionally high-quality audiovisual productions with extensive outreach are most likely to remain in the collective cultural memory as a truthful reference to historical events despite the more accurate historical texts. In our book, we have asked Renira Rampazzo Gambarato and Johannes Heuman to resume their research on the miniseries *Chernobyl*, focusing on memory and media oblivion. Still, their chapter also discusses the role of ethics and aesthetics based on Peirce’s semiotics.

Let us, therefore, review the various contributions we have just summarized. The chapter “*Chernobyl: A Miniseries between Fiction and Reality*” by **Giorgio Grignaffini** opens the volume with a semiotic perspective on the miniseries format and its suitability for the historical drama genre. Grignaffini questions the fiction products that “take their cue from real life,” reflecting on the semiotic status of rewriting documentary sources related to the dramatic accident at the Soviet power plant and proposes a typology that involves both narrative and figurative levels based on a semantic category that opposes “continuity” with the sources to the “discontinuities” that impose production and dramatization choices.

Nicola Dusi, in the chapter titled “History, Drama, Retelling: Intermedial Realism in *Chernobyl*”, shows how the documentary approach of the miniseries production is based on archival documents, such as historical photographs, literary texts, and film footage to question the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and the relations between textual semiotics, memory, and historical reference, between continuity and discontinuity concerning sources. In *Chernobyl*, the ‘docu-drama’ genre becomes a question of enunciative, textual and metadiscursive choices, and of gradual transitions from “fictional mode” to “documentary mode” (Odin 2013). Dusi suggests speaking of an “intermedial realism” given by the “interweaving of media that constructs reality effects,” particularly by considering the episodes and the intermedial editing of the finale.

Despite the preeminence that most approaches to *Chernobyl* give to Legasov and Shcherbina, **Charo Lacalle’s** essay, “*Chernobyl* Reloaded: Renewing Disaster Fictional Narratives through Female Characters,” focuses on the prominence of the female characters Lyudmilla Ignatenko (Jessie Buckley) and Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson), who rework the classic Homeric male hero models of Achilles and Hector, respectively. Lacalle analyzes the evolution of both women within the framework of the main genres from which the catastrophe is (re)constructed: disaster movies and documentary. The intersection of both approaches provides the tropes and narrative structures to a post-documentary storytelling aimed at explaining the relationship between individuals and the world through the lens of the apocalyptic: the risks of nuclear energy, in this case.

“Events that Defy Storytelling: Narrative and Dramaturgical Solutions of *Chernobyl*,” by **Paolo Braga**, explores the challenge faced by the miniseries in depicting distant historical events already somewhat removed from the viewers’ consciousness. Drawing on Wayne C. Booth’s theory of narrative rhetoric, Braga’s approach to *Chernobyl* narrative techniques analyses the strategies adopted to turn the events concerning the Russian nuclear plant into a compelling screen story – particularly concerning the reasons behind the expressive power of the story. The characterization of the main protagonists, the construction of a narrative structure capable of driving the story without dissipating tension, and the thematic depth are the main qualities of personal but compelling storytelling, elevated by Mazin from a largely forgotten tragedy of modern history to a metaphor for universal values.

Andrea Bernardelli’s chapter, “In These Stories, It Doesn’t Matter Who the Heroes Are. Characters’ Construction in *Chernobyl*,” compares the different ways in which protagonists are constructed in Mazin’s miniseries and the Danila Kozlovsky-directed film *Chernobyl 1986* (Netflix, 2021). Bernardelli identifies a close relationship between how characters are built and the functionality of the respective narrative structures. The ambiguous construction of the characters in the *Chernobyl* miniseries aims to confront the viewer with the sensation of simultaneously facing a genuine narrative and a fictional reinterpretation. The Netflix film, by contrast, far

exceeds the rational elements and biases the good/evil polarization aspect towards the pole of good by moving the narrative towards a more captivating or emotional impact.

In “*Chernobyl* and the Anthropology of Sacrifice,” **Alberto N. García** explores the narrative strategies through which the miniseries triggers an anthropological reflection on the transformative power of sacrifice. The analysis identifies three types of sacrificial acts: 1) that assumed voluntarily by different characters for the sake of the collective (*heroic*); 2) animal sacrifice decreed by the authorities or forced by radioactive toxicity, where immolation has both a literal and a figurative value (*symbolic*); 3) the death of an innocent human being to free others from their hardships and adversities (*redemptive*). García argues that *Chernobyl* transcends simplistic dichotomies of good versus evil, turning the narrative motif of sacrifice into an exploration of heroism and the search for truth.

In the chapter “History, Power, and Narrative. *Chernobyl* Is Still There,” **Federico Montanari** questions “the relationship between the fictional dimension and the historical event, and the representation of truth conditions.” Montanari talks about the strategic and manipulative capacity of the series to use “veridiction modalities” and how the miniseries becomes “a macro-text that reflects and reshapes societal perceptions of the Chernobyl disaster.” This occurs through a remediation of cultural memory, which, according to Montanari, also opens moral questions, but with the risk of platformization and conformism of the serial product, which shows a tendency towards simplification and over-stereotyping, for example, concerning political discourse and the Cold War context.

Antonella Mascio, in the chapter titled “*Chernobyl*: From Nuclear Disaster to the TV series, and Beyond,” questions how the Chernobyl catastrophe represents a collective trauma, an “anthropological shock and a global threat.” For Mascio, the *Chernobyl* miniseries shows the relationship between archive and trauma, to be investigated from both a conceptual and theoretical point of view: the archive allows for the generation of future stories, and the miniseries activates mechanisms of remediation and mediatisation of past and present testimonies, “to achieve the effect of reality.” If the story is based on documentary sources, at the same time, “it becomes an example of activation and elaboration of historical materials.”

“*Chernobyl*: The Cognitive Value of Multi-plot Aesthetics in Contemporary Television” by **Héctor J. Pérez** attempts to demonstrate that Mazin’s miniseries seeks to show the viewer a new form of cognitive access to the complexity of the causes and consequences of the nuclear catastrophe. To this end, Pérez explores those dimensions of the miniseries architecture that contribute to inducing aesthetic experience by facilitating the viewer’s cognitive awakening. Based on the cognitive psychology of narrative comprehension, the analysis shows the activation of a complex set of relational elements in the viewers’ minds triggered by the evolution of the plots by narrating the events from a cognitively rewarding perspective. And thus, *Chernobyl*’s multiplot structure suggests a network of interconnected constituents intended to induce the viewer to identify their reciprocal interactions.

In the chapter “The ‘Lifeworld’ Criterion in HBO’s *Chernobyl*: An Approach of the *Intentio Lectoris*,” **Ioanna Vovou** asks: “How is the world of life, our experience of the real or the historical real forged through fiction?” Vovou first answers with a semi-pragmatic analysis of the oscillation of the miniseries genre (between fiction, documentary, and use of archives), governed by the promise of telling “the untold true story” – a “strong common ideological tendency,” claims Vovou, in which both production and audience are confronted with “multiple regimes of truth.” Secondly, through qualitative interviews with a selected sample of Greek audiences, Vovou shows that “the truth of fiction should be understood as a perceptual category.” The *Chernobyl* miniseries then becomes “a fictional representation of a historical event” and a response “to the ideology of transparency in a context where reality is reduced to the visible.”

As closing remarks, **Renira Rampazzo Gambarato** and **Johannes Heuman**, in their chapter titled “Transcending the Blurred Boundaries of *Chernobyl*,” state that the *Chernobyl* miniseries “has the potential to influence what is culturally remembered and what is forgotten,” acting as “a representation that ingrains memories of the nuclear disaster into the public sphere.” Gambarato and Heuman discuss about “transmedia ethics,” combining theoretical approaches from transmedia studies, cultural memory, and Peircean semiotics (in which ethics is understood as a connection between aesthetics and logic) to explore how cultural memory becomes “a dynamic and performative process of remembrance across diverse media platforms.” In the *Chernobyl* miniseries, audiences actively discuss factual and fictional elements, facing “the ethical implications of the fictionalization of historical events.”

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