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Mediating the Past and Historicizing the Present:

The HBO Series *Chernobyl* (2019) and Its Transnational Audience Responses on IMDb

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Seminar Date: 2023-12-15

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FIMT09, Spring-Autumn 2023
Master's Thesis
30 ECTS

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put the vulnerability of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant under the spotlight. Meanwhile, the remembrance and reflection of the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 has been ongoing in different media among which the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019) stands out and resonates transnationally. The existing analysis on *Chernobyl* mainly focuses on how the streaming series provides authentic depiction of a historical event and takes part in shaping the cultural memory of the Chernobyl disaster. However, the variety of audience responses to the series is scholarly omitted. The thesis takes *Chernobyl* and its IMDb user reviews as a focal point. This case study aims to discuss the audience reception and interpretation in contemporary cultural dynamics of mediated memories, collective memory, personal memory, and media. Through close reading of selected reviews from May 2019 to January 2023, this research presents how audiences emotionally and critically engage with the series in the process of contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization. This study contributes to previous research on the social-cultural contexts in which audiences interpret a mediated historical event on screen as well as a transnational approach to understand how such a disaster is remembered and reflected in the digital age.

Keywords: Chernobyl, nuclear disaster, audience research, media and memories, cultural memory, television drama and history

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Acknowledgements

I must begin by acknowledging my supervisor Marie Cronqvist who is caring, supportive and recommends books that always inspire my writing. She and Professor Lars Gustaf Andersson have been taking good care of our master's programme and their students. I cannot be more grateful for their teaching, constructive feedback, and generous help throughout the years of my master's studies. My sincere gratitude also goes to Helena Nilsson who is always responsive to my practical questions and provides invaluable administrative support. I would also like to thank Elisabet Björklund for her probing questions and thoughtful responses to my thesis drafts at seminars.

I owe a significant debt to my family and life-long friends in my homeland—Lu Yinjiao, Zhang Lipei, Xu Suyuan, Liu Yuetong, Li Junzhe, Li Zhanjun, Wu Wenjing, and Chen Xiaoqing—who respect or support my every important decision in life. From the time that I was small, their experiences and encouragement have enabled me to trust and believe in myself through ups and downs. This thesis is dedicated to them, and my grandfather Zhang Lishi and uncle Zhang Zhihua who did not live to see my graduations.

In the summer of 2021, I took a 16-hour flight to pursue my master's degree abroad. Since then I have embarked on a wonderful journey on land far away from my home country. Here I have met people I adore and love, and I have unforgettable memories with them. I also feel that I and my other two classmates Clémentine and Norah are meant to know each other and become friends. I cherish every moment we spent together. Even though we are currently living in different countries or continents, I am convinced that life will guide us to meet again.

It has been a pleasure exploring and writing the topic of media and memory I am fascinated with. The courses I took, movies I watched, literature I read, and papers I wrote in the past two and a half years had developed my understanding of the concepts that became the seed of this thesis. Now my thesis writing has become a memory, and the writing journey culminates at the completion of my thesis as the ultimate memory product.

Introduction

Another time I'll think about it and find ways of cheering myself up—like, maybe death isn't the end, and he's only changed somehow and lives in another world. I work in a library, I read lots of books, I meet many people. I want to talk about death, to understand it. I'm looking for consolation. I read in the papers, in books, I go to the theater if it's about death. It's physically painful for me to be without him—I can't be alone.

Valentina Panasevich, wife of a liquidator, "*A Solitary Human Voice*"¹

What remains with us after somebody's death, especially our beloved's? In *Voices From Chernobyl*, the first book to present personal accounts of the Chernobyl tragedy, the interviewee Valentina Panasevich vividly describes her heartbreaking moments after losing her husband who died of Chernobyl-related thyroid cancer after his stint at the clean-up. Her husband's suffering and death from radiation sickness had caused a void in her heart. The sorrow, uncertainty, desperation still bloomed in her belly years after her husband passed away. Death has a comet tail that can remain with us for a long time. In similar fashion, a Chernobyl-like shadow of death had hung over the European continent and the rest of the world as the Covid-19 pandemic raged since 2020 with imperceptible dangers from the rapidly spreading virus and the unexpected magnitude of the impact on our mental health, daily life and society. Empty streets in towns and cities, calls to wear masks and maintain a corporeal distance with others, and countless stories of parting families due to sudden death or unintended quarantine became the new normal. It, at the same time, seems familiar if compared to the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident that thousands of people were evacuated and became ill and radioactive fallout spread across vast areas of Europe.

However, the pervasiveness and immediacy of digital media may well prove to be a critical variable that frankly did not exist in the era of the Chernobyl incident. Rumors and misinformation about the origin and spread of the virus and resulting disease that counter the facts can be disseminated in a short time. Nevertheless, the continuous voice from and constant communication

¹ Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen, (New York: Picador, 2005), 224.

among ordinary people that are delivered by means of digital media strengthen their connectivity, even though they are spatially bounded in reality because of the invisible threat of the virus.

Besides, the media can archive our memories of the coronavirus pandemic, make them available to the public, and preserve them for future generations. Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at Luxembourg University launched three projects—*covid-19 Memories*, *Yes We Care*, and *#covid19fr*—to collect personal records of ordinary people’s experiences during the lockdown, compile oral accounts from healthcare workers, and understand the process of memorizing a pandemic on tweets respectively². The presentation and analysis of media material collected in the projects clearly display people’s lifestyle shifts, changes in daily healthcare practices, and challenges to public health systems in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, with an increase in the media content of memorization. With time, those changes are swallowed up by the new normality ushered in by the pandemic, accompanied by the decline of media expression and remembrance regarding them. The research results of these three COVID-19 related projects are published on C²DH’s online platform, which is archived for the public and future generations to access.

Our memories of the pandemic are highly dependent on media content that we have received or contributed to as the media made a great effort to bridge the information gap between people quarantined at home and the outside world. However, when we look back to the past we would often imagine what if we could have done better on the prevention and control of such infectious disease. This makes me realize that recollection is not a linear process but jumping back and forth between the past and present. When Chinese cities were under lockdown in early 2020, the TV series *Chernobyl* (2019) was on a recommendation list of high-quality drama for people to kill their time. Many Chinese audiences were impressed by the horror and depressing atmosphere present in the series, and some of them commented on Douban, a Chinese social networking and review website, analogizing it to what they felt about the Fukushima nuclear disaster and current coronavirus epidemic. The Chernobyl catastrophe seems quite distant and unfamiliar to many Chinese people. It is in contrast to the reviews on IMDb where audiences are more likely to project their personal experiences and memories into the drama. It seems that their different reception of *Chernobyl* grows from the culture and social conventions surrounding them.

² “Projects related to COVID-19,” C²DH, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/report/2020/covid-related-projects>.

The existing analysis on *Chernobyl* is more about how it provides a collective narrative of the past which boosts viewers' "empathy for the historical experiences of others"³ and further shapes a shared understanding. Renira Gambarato, Johannes Heuman, and Ylva Lindberg point out that the heroic narrative, meticulous design production, and the network effect of streaming media contribute to circulating "the cultural memory of the accident itself and the sovietness of Chernobyl"⁴ in a global context. Meanwhile, the depiction of a Soviet bureaucratic government in the drama inevitably entails the simplification and compression of Chernobyl as a man-made disaster. The variety and subjectiveness of audience interpretation, however, are academically omitted. I am interested in how differently people perceive or remember a significant historical event in their cultural practices. Therefore, I would like to conduct a relevant research through the lens of IMDb reviews on *Chernobyl*, and this case study would make a unique contribution to the research fields on audience, media and memory.

Background and Relevance

On 26 April 1986, the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Pripjat of Soviet Ukraine exploded. The resulting radioactive contamination, the death tolls and injuries, the massive evacuation, and the officially designated exclusion zone have casted a long shadow on people who experienced the disaster and future generations. Now, more than 35 years have passed. The abandoned city Pripjat, photos of beloved ones who died from Chernobyl-related illness, non-fiction novels about the disaster event and its trauma, historical dramas about the occurrence at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant witness, restore, reflect, and reenact the disaster, its effects and consequences in their own ways. The varied mediation of the Chernobyl incident helps shape a historical understanding and collective remembrance of the event. Meanwhile, people may retrieve their memories of the disaster by injecting their personal emotions and incorporating their life experiences into the zeitgeist they perceive through media content. Memories, therefore, are

³ Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry, introduction to *Film, History and Memory*, ed. Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

⁴ Renira R. Gambarato, Johannes Heuman, and Ylva Lindberg, "Streaming Media and the Dynamics of Remembering and Forgetting: The *Chernobyl* Case," *Memory Studies* 15, no.2 (2022): 275.

“subjective, highly selective reconstructions dependent on the situation in which they are recalled”⁵. By the same token, mediating, remembering, and recalling the past is more than a reenactment; it is highly subjected to the particular presents in the act of doing⁶.

In a comparative study conducted in 2021 on the memories of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, and Bulgarians living on the periphery of the affected zone, the interviewed residents indicate that such a disastrous event and its consequences “caused trauma of various dimensions in countries where radiation levels were elevated”⁷. The majority of them were informed of the Chernobyl accident late, mainly through their social circles. Similarly, they learnt about the protective measures to reduce doses from radiation exposure on an informal basis. They did not experience stress and trauma until they were overwhelmed by the fear that their lives and health as well as their loved ones’ could be affected. Nevertheless, they do not consider themselves direct victims of the Chernobyl disaster. Instead, influenced by the collective narratives they reckoned there were only two types of victims: liquidators who engaged in the initial plant cleanup and soon died of overexposure to high levels of radiation, and people who fell ill and died afterwards because of radioactive contamination of food they took in. The blame for the irreparable harm to human health, according to most interviewees, should be taken by their national government. However, some Russian respondents who might be still immersed in the memory of solidarity in Russian society considered government actions a success, even though they were clearly aware of government coverups of the scale of the disaster and its long-term effects on human health.

Such conflicting feelings of trauma and nostalgia are visually and acoustically represented in the five-part mini-series *Chernobyl* which is written by Craig Mazin, directed by Johan Renck, and co-produced by HBO, Sky Television, Sister Pictures, The Mighty Mint, and Word Games. Since it began airing on the streaming platform HBO in the United States on 6 May 2019 and Sky Atlantic in the UK a day after, it has brought a spike of interest in the general public around the world. The series was shot in Lithuania, but it brings audiences to the scenes of an explosion at the

⁵ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8.

⁶ Loc. cit.

⁷ Yelis Erolova and Yulia Tsyryapkina, “Local Reflections on the Chernobyl Disaster 35 Years Later: Peripheral Narratives from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Bulgaria,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71, no.1 (March 1, 2023): 28.

Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Soviet Ukraine on 26 April 1986 and presents the subsequent desperate rescues, clean-ups, and attempts to find out the cause of the explosion. It is highly appreciated for its staggeringly authentic mise-en-scène, bringing a real historical event to life. As Russia invaded and occupied parts of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the vulnerability of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant has regained global attention. The Chernobyl events still arouse media interest and spur public discussion, and the remembrance and reflection of the disaster, after 35 years, is ongoing.

Aim and Research Question

The thesis aims to investigate the audience reception and interpretation in contemporary cultural dynamics of mediated memories, collective memory, personal memory, and media. The analysis of the Chernobyl disaster mediation and its audience reception and interpretation is an effort to transcend the norm of putting *Chernobyl* into the framework of “the Cold War polarization between totalitarianism and the free world”⁸ in a cultural perspective and to contribute to a transnational approach to understand the entangled relationship of audience, media and memory. By qualitatively analyzing IMDb user reviews on the HBO's mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019), I attempt to shed light on how audience reception and interpretation is subject not only to the form and style of the series but also to the personal and social conditions under which they view it. The review analysis intends to answer the following questions:

- What themes related to the mediation of memory can be identified in the reviews?
- What roles do individual and collective memories of the Chernobyl disaster play in the reception and interpretation of the TV series?

⁸ Gambarato, Heuman, and Lindberg, 281.

Previous Research

Audience research in essence explores the power dynamics between audiences and media, media content, organizations, and technologies with which they interact. Over the past century, there have been attempts to construct the notion of the audience by factoring the social, cultural, and political environment. The audience was seen as a faceless, undifferentiated collective who were acted upon by media in the field of media and communication in the early 20th century. Accordingly, audiences were considered to be very passive in their relationship to the media. This echoes the concept of mass audience which is communicatively and socially distant from a more powerful, expert, or prestigious media source⁹. As the technique of systematic surveys became widely used for measuring public opinion in the 1930s, audiences were not longer underestimated as objects of media power. Instead, the mutual shaping of public opinion from a collective audience and social, political, and media institutions was given attention. On the one hand, opinion polls present the public opinion as an aggregation of individual, private attitudes and beliefs, and they imply the rising status of citizens' views in policy-making. On the other hand, the research on news and public opinion uncovers the ability of news media to affect the salience of particular matters in such a way to influence the public's perception of social and political issues. The academic focus has shifted to how audiences choose media to accommodate their needs, how and why audiences interpret media content differently, and in which contexts audiences use media and receive content. Such scholarship on audiences as active media users affirms their power.

Beginning in the 1980s, academic study began to understand audiences as more than media users and emphasize their participatory roles in content construction and distribution. Meanwhile, the fan culture in which fan audiences acted as both media consumers and producers started to gain scholarly attention, and the field of fan studies was born¹⁰. In addition to social and cultural investigation in the field, the political power of grassroots communities and any democratic

⁹ Denis McQuail, *Audience Analysis* (SAGE, 1997), 7.

¹⁰ John L. Sullivan, *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2019), 235.

potentials of their engagement with media production and circulation have been scented out¹¹. The recent research notices the transcendent scale and efficiency of audiences consuming, creating, and circulating media content in the networked media society of the 21st century. The expansion of audience autonomy is foregrounded. However, as José van Dijck argues, user participation is actually coded into algorithms by technologies, framed and capitalized by media conglomerates, which reinforces the existing inequality between the audience and media¹². User activity on a specific media platform can be taken advantage of to measure the effectiveness of its advertisements and streamline the custom-tailored service that the platform claims to provide. Alternatively, Annette Hill understands power relations in the transactions between audiences and media industries as push-pull dynamics¹³. Cultural production creates effective distribution strategies and employs narrative techniques to push audiences into content, while audiences make their own choices about how to pull different kinds of content and products into their everyday life. Also, some scholars are inclined to understand the roles that the audience play in the media from a historical perspective. Tom Standage points out the way today's audiences share, consume, and manipulate information builds upon habits and conventions that can date back centuries¹⁴. Such understanding is not to stress nothing new under the sun but to bring the interconnection of audience practices in different ages to the fore.

This thesis will be focused on film and/or television audiences. The encounter with a visual medium implies the practice of viewing between the subject and the medium and the conditions of that encounter¹⁵. In early cinema studies, the viewer of the nineteenth century is positioned to sensorially experience a cinema of attractions which, proposed by Tom Gunning, is appealing in

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, "Rethinking 'Rethinking Convergence/Culture,'" *Cultural Studies* 28, no.2 (2014): 270.

¹² José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

¹³ Annette Hill, *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 4.

¹⁴ Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media – the First Two Thousand Years*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.

¹⁵ Shawn Shimpach, "Viewing," in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 62.

the gesture of overt performativity, rather than any narrative immersion or realistic characterization¹⁶. As the whole motion picture industry developed standards for film production, distribution, and exhibition in the twentieth century, cinema was more productized, accompanied by the refinement of narrative and formal languages to create a reality effect or provide satisfaction. This transforms the viewing experience to spectatorship. The subject position of an individual who views is recognized as the spectator, and the spectator's gaze is constituted through the process of viewing¹⁷. This situates the spectator in a more powerful position to recognize the voyeurism of the spectatorship and to make sense of disparate images and sounds in the constructed reality of a cinematic world¹⁸. It is possible for the spectator to be aware of cinema's artificiality when it exposes or reflects the process of its own making. Different from the closed, dark space in which film audiences' attention is directed towards the screen, television viewing is presumed to be distracted in the context of a private, domestic home. The engagement of television audiences with their size and composition is usually measured in ratings. They are used to assess the performance of media content and to develop and evaluate strategies related to television programming and advertising placement. This turns television audiences to be gendered, socially and geographically categorized aggregates which take part in the production and distribution of media content.

The study of film and television audience practice is more often about what is viewed, and what perception would be in combination with where the viewing takes place, while the research on film and television audiences themselves put more attention to "such questions as how do audiences respond to what's on the screen, and why do they respond in the ways they do?"¹⁹ Films are open to interpretations beyond their initial intention of "what they are", "within and against

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 70.

¹⁷ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 103.

¹⁸ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81-2.

¹⁹ Bruce A. Austin, "Researching the Film Audience: Purposes, Procedures, and Problems," *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35, no. 3 (1983): 35.

wider contextual frameworks in which film reviews play their own part”²⁰. In this sense, audiences’ emotions, opinions, and reflections present in their reviews are a useful tool to understand personal variations of their responses to a film or television programme and to address primary questions that the research on film and television audiences ask. Therefore, IMDb reviews are of significance to measure audience engagement in media contents as their information density is salient in a media-saturated age when convergence has altered the dynamics and performance of engagement across diverse media platforms²¹.

However, the existing scholarship on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of IMDb user reviews is scarce. It mainly provides interpretative insights into audience reactions to films and television series in a political perspective and focuses on the relationship between gender and audience reviews. By dissecting IMDb film of a comedy *The Dictator* (2012), Juha Ridanpää sees IMDb as a potential stage for political participation and audiences as agents relaying the use of humor within the context of politically sensitive issues. How audiences form and develop their relationship with films is also discussed. On one hand, films play a role in diverting “the manners in which people conceive the political world”²². On the other hand, the conception of films and politics in reviews reciprocally influences the way people perceive the political nature of films reviewers refer to.

Liesbet Van Zoonen’s analysis on audience reactions to Hollywood political movies and television series illustrates how people perform a political self in their comments²³. Some reviewers relate the political story in a film to its authentic way of describing politics in real life to show they are smart, whereas others comment on politicians and their performance with reference to what fiction implies in order to express their political positions. There are also other reflective users considering politicians to be the same people as them with flesh and blood, which

²⁰ Juha Ridanpää, “Humour Is Serious’ as a Geopolitical Speech Act: IMDb Film Reviews of Sacha Baron Cohen’s *The Dictator*,” *Geopolitics* 19, no.1 (2014): 144.

²¹ Nick Couldry, “The Necessary Future of the Audience ... and How to Research It,” in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 222.

²² Ridanpää, 144.

²³ Liesbet van Zoonen, “Audience Reactions to Hollywood Politics,” *Media, Culture, & Society* 29, no.4 (2007): 531-47.

gives a reasonable excuse to complexities of everyday politics. Some people even project their fantasy of a better politics onto comments and satirize the real one. Different from the qualitative approach in Liesbet Van Zoonen's research and Juha Ridanpää's, Jahna Otterbacher's article published in 2013 demonstrates different characteristics of male- and female-authored reviews by using a separate logistic regression model with three types of predictors of gender: stylistic, content and metadata features²⁴. It gives statistical support to the correlation between gender and review utility and concludes that IMDb is a male-majority forum. However, the analysis process is not applicable now in a sense that there is no gender filter on IMDb any more.

My analysis of IMDb reviews on *Chernobyl* will move towards a cultural perspective and endorse the transnational nature of *Chernobyl* audiences and their reviews on IMDb, which are lacking in previous IMDb review research. It will open up how audiences project their autobiographical or personal memories in their reception and interpretation of the TV series that can be transmitted to other audiences. Though the variable cultural contexts where audiences are engaged persist, the memory sharing embedded in IMDb reviews recognizes the potential of audience reception and interpretation to transcend national frameworks. The interconnection of memory and audience research in my thesis can diversify the approach to audiences in a fluid and multicultural modern context and be an asset to understand the complexities of audience responses interwoven with memory shaping by media.

Methodology and Empirical Material

This thesis conducts a qualitative research on 3440 IMDb user reviews on *Chernobyl* written in English from May 2019 to January 2023. I read through all reviews within that time span, and I particularly selected 152 reviews which focus not only on the series itself only but also involve reviewers' individual remembrances or/and lived experiences as my thesis concerns the mutual shaping of the audience and mediated memories. Then I grouped together the reviews of similar themes which I generated from my first research question to do close readings. The next step is to highlight extracts that appear to share a common focus which is assigned a corresponding label, and the final step is to look for dimensions underlying the themes and labels to make them

²⁴ Jahna Otterbacher, "Gender, Writing and Ranking in Review Forums: A Case Study of the IMDb," *Knowledge and Information Systems: An International Journal* 35, no.3 (2013): 645–64.

fit into a coherent picture. Such qualitative data analysis is expected to provide in-depth interpretation of selected review highlights and an illuminating remark in ways that reflect on both process and insights. The review selection and thematization, on one hand, respond to the dynamics of mediated memories moving back and forth between the personal and the collective, traveling up and down between past and future²⁵; on the other hand, it inevitably excludes the reviews which do not fit well with the theoretical framework, and thus the review analysis cannot encompass every sort of audience reception and interpretation. Also, the whole process of selecting, sorting, interpreting reviews is unavoidably subjective, which requires me to reckon with the embedded interpretive authority and try to resist it as much as possible²⁶.

Many reviews on the website are of rich descriptions, personal emotions, and strong narratives. Though the geographical locations and national backgrounds of IMDb users are undisclosed, personal information given in the reviews suggests the series' audiences are of different nationalities. Some users are very expressive to describe how the series resonates with them, making them recall their personal memories when the Chernobyl disaster happened. Also, it can be found that lots of users are generous with their compliments of the reenactment of the Soviet era and nuclear incident, while others explicitly point out the fictional elements and nature of the series. In some reviews, the reviewers' political inclinations are implicitly shown as well. Some understand the incident as a man-made disaster, an inevitable tragedy in a political game, and even reckon that the authoritarian surveillant Soviet system mirrors the American society and its federal actions in Covid-19, and the Japanese government responses to the Fukushima accident.

Using Collaborative Editing Services, reviewers give consent for the unrestricted use and exclusive rights of any information they submitted and posted to IMDb²⁷. In other words, IMDb has the final say in the display of any user materials. It is acknowledged that IMDb user reviews that can be found on the website are non-confidential. Meanwhile, every IMDb account has a User

²⁵ José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 22.

²⁶ Sharon M. Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016), 216.

²⁷ "Collaborative Editing Services Terms & Conditions of Use," IMDb | Help, accessed April 16, 2023, https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-website

ID associated with a public profile that a user chooses to present. Each account's private contact name (real name) is not publicly displayed and only for communication with customer service and emails sent from IMDb²⁸. The anonymity of an IMDb user and its reviews is assured to some extent. My research on IMDb user reviews on *Chernobyl*, therefore, does not invade any user's privacy.

Thesis Disposition

The thesis is divided into four parts, first of which is the introductory chapter. It has outlined the backdrop of the mediation of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster which contextualizes a global concern on the nuclear plant's vulnerability during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing transnational audience responses to the HBO's mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019). It then has given an overview of audience research development, a brief discussion on the relationship between audiences and film/television reception, and the existing research on IMDb film reviews, supporting the need to give attention to the subjectivity and diversity of audience reception and interpretation of a historical drama. Taking IMDb user reviews on *Chernobyl* as a point of departure, the rest of this chapter has dealt with the purpose, process, limitation, and ethics of conducting a qualitative approach to interpret and analyze the reviews. It has also summarized representative review characteristics which validate the subsequent interpretation and analysis of the selected reviews. The second chapter is devoted to elaborating on the entanglement of individuality and collectivity in memory and media, and the specificity of digital media in memory shaping and circulation which will thread through the discussion in the qualitative review analysis on the active roles that audiences play in remembering the past and shaping historical understanding.

After giving a theoretical framework, the subsequent analytical chapter attempts to address the research questions that are put forward in the first chapter. The answers to these questions will be anchored in close readings of the series' IMDb user reviews. The review analysis may be chronological, ranging from May 2019 to January 2023, but it does not mean that the audience

²⁸ "User Naming - User ID, Real Name, IMDb Page," IMDb | Help, accessed April 16, 2023, https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-information/user-naming-user-id-real-name-imdb-page/G4W87AHTV4ENBTGC?ref_=helpart_nav_34#

reception and interpretation of *Chernobyl* merely deal with a past as well as being presented in a linear way. They are also concerns of the present and future. The Chernobyl disaster is given new meanings when contemporary audiences interpret the historical drama of the incident and recall their personal or collective memories about that. To explore the dynamics among personal/collective memories, mediation of the nuclear disaster, and the reconstruction of the past, this chapter will engage with a thematic, structured qualitative analysis of selected review excerpts with different perspectives to approach the series.

Finally, the concluding part will present the key findings from the analytical chapter and revisit the aim and research questions of the thesis. It then will return to the limitations in scholarly fields of audience research and memory studies, suggesting the benefit of adopting a transnational perspective on the audience reception and their memories of a mediated historical event, especially for the understanding about how to remember the past and historicize the present in our own time.

Theoretical Framework: Media and Memory

The Intersection of Media and Memory as a Field

Photographs, tapes, films, and media alike are acknowledged to capture and restore the having-been-thereness of a past. When we flip through photo albums, listen to tapes and music records, watch home videos and television, we might conjure up a specific moment or event in our life which brings up many different emotions. In this sense, media have a capacity to recall our memories, and we can connect ourselves to our pasts by means of media. However, it is not the tangible mediated objects but the contents they present that trigger our recollections of past experiences. Meanwhile, recollecting the past is not merely an act of re-picturing or recreating it but of the contemporary brain functioning to evoke and filter past sensations²⁹. Memories are constantly in a state of becoming, contingent on not only mediated objects and their enabling technologies but also the sociocultural matrix in which people interact with the formers.

“The fundamental role of mediation and the dominance of social construction” lie at the core of collective memory studies and media research field and bond them together³⁰. The intersection of these two realms has developed from numerous works of scholarship which apply and advance Maurice Halbwach’s concept of collective memory to present the flow of memories under social frameworks, in particular, family, religion, and social class³¹. It provides a new sociological perspective to prevalent psychological theories of memory which are mainly concerned with an individual’s cognitive abilities for personal recall. Boundaries and distinctions of social groups are identified from their different ways of interpreting the same occurrences and

²⁹ van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, 30.

³⁰ Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg, introduction to *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in A New Media Age*, ed. Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

³¹ Loc. cit.

Joanne Garde-Hansen, *Media and Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 37.
Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading, introduction to *Save As...Digital Memories*, ed. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

shaping memories of the past. The interpretations and recollections, in return, reinforce the identity of a particular group. Importantly, the development and omnipresence of mass media in everyday life make ideas of collective memory deviate from Maurice Halbwach's initial model in the context of a geographical culturally-bounded community. As Benedict Anderson observes, the widespread use of print technology and the establishment of print capitalism were crucial to constructing the imagined community on which a modern nation was based, beyond its territorial boundaries³².

The subsequent popularization of television, cinema and other mass media, with commodified mass cultures, has enabled an account of a past to be shared without limit of time and social spaces. People are invited to experience an encounter with a past through which they did not necessarily live. This challenges the idea of stable shared social frameworks and opens up the possibility that imagined communities who have little in common in their ethnic or cultural backgrounds might share the same memories. In Nadi Tofighian's research on the entertainment landscape in Southeast Asia at the turn of the century, theatres were a place where "societal differences in terms of race, gender, and class were temporarily blurred"³³, even though society was ethnically segregated or segregated by class. The cinema was thus able to offer spectators from diverse stratum and ancestries a shared archive of experience. The procession in London in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was filmed to convey an image of the powerful, unified British Empire to its population around the world. The dominance of British colonial rule was implied in the films, while racial hierarchies were disrupted for the time being in cinemas of Southeast Asia. For now, the films store precious images of the Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and concretize a collective memory of the Victorian era. The forces of modernity and the changes wrought by flourishing global cultural economy have made social frameworks upon which collective memories are structured more complicated and dynamic, which makes Maurice

³² Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 44-6.

³³ Nadi Tofighian, "Blurring the Colonial Binary: Turn-of-the-Century Transnational Entertainment in Southeast Asia" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2013), 198.

Halbwach's notion of collective memory increasingly inadequate. Nevertheless, one implication of his claim is undoubtful that "the present affects the way in which societies remember the past"³⁴.

How societies remember cannot be completely separated from how people remember. A collective memory can be constructed in the process of personal memory sharing. Diaries, witness accounts, autobiographies and memoirs offer the personal slice of history. The graphic novel *Maus* and Anne Frank's diary invite readers to experience the hide-and-seek of the Second World War, and the intimate details of the day-to-day magnify the horrors of war. Such personal documentation allows different generations to take on lived memories of witnesses to the war and to remember the bloody pawprints of history. In this sense people are bound not by factual events but by shared cultural experience of remembering a communal past. An actual or perceived participation in a collectivity is inscribed in the shaping of memories, and "recall tends to lean on a sense of belonging or sharing rather than on a relocation in real time or space"³⁵. A case in point is how Chinese netizens leave comments on Dr. Li's posts on Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter. Dr. Li is a Chinese doctor who raised the alarm about the country's coronavirus outbreak but died with his boots on. Even after his death, Chinese Weibo users keep writing down their happiness and sufferings in life and sending their best wishes to Dr. Li on the social platform as if he is still alive. Those comments are motivated by a wish to communicate with others who also suffer from the trauma of the pandemic, to complain about a sweeping lockdown, to support and comfort one another, despite the loneliness of sending one-way messages.

The sharing nature of humans and the tangible lived connectivity brought by digital media enhance the mutuality of the individual and collective in the construction of memory. As social creatures, people record their individual experiences not only to develop social bonds by sharing but also to understand themselves through the looking glass of the present and relations to others. Videos, pictures, music and written accounts, one one hand, give access to reminisce about and reflect upon their thoughts and emotions, what they said and did, and how they looked like on occasions in the past. On the other hand, these items developed from analog to digital present how people remember themselves has been mediated in different ways by different media formats over

³⁴ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 8.

³⁵ van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, 9.

time. It indicates ongoing negotiations between media and relevant stakeholders that concern “the materiality and embodiment of media technologies as well as the meanings arising from their use”³⁶. People decide what to record, select which media to keep a record, make choices of what to recall with or without records, which is often influenced by their social surroundings and cultural conventions that shape their inclinations and prefigure their decisions. This makes the line between private and public of personal memory more diffuse.

It should come as no surprise that the baffling complexity of memory construction in the increasingly media-saturated world draws an expanding study of media and memory. The past two decades have seen a profusion of important work on the relationship between media and memory which moves beyond the familiar opposition between social construction and essentialism, between individuality and collectivity (such as Joanne Garde-Hansen’s *Media and Memory*, Alison Landsberg’s *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, and José van Dijck’s *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*). Indebted to this literature, I hope to provide a well-rounded picture of the mutual shaping of memory and media by articulating the mediation of memory, and connecting it with popular culture and globalized communication. It is also impossible to think about media and memory without noticing constant tensions between individuality and collectivity, and interfaces between different media technologies and changing social formations and cultural imaginaries.

Media and Memory in the Digital Age

As discussed before, media are central to the ongoing process of remembering and forgetting in which individuals and groups reconfigure their relationship to the past while resituating themselves in relation to the lives of others and their surroundings in time and space. The technological development of media, however, is not often applauded in terms of its contribution to outsource individuals’ capacity to remember, and it is an irony likely to recur with each new generation of media technologies. The manual means of documenting past recollection was viewed as a degeneration of pure memory, while it receives the authentic label when electronic and digital tools to record past experiences emerge. Similar dualities can be traced in the binary opposition

³⁶ Ibid., 50.

being established by scholars between media as artificial and manufacture and memory as lived and experienced³⁷. There has been intensive critical discourse on the manipulative role of media in memory-keeping. The electronic media, notably film and television, represent the past with their different forms and styles, which, at the same time, raises an awareness of the artifice of media representations and suspicion over the alleged authentic documentation of the past. To revise the existing binary thinking in media and memory's alliance, José van Dijck approaches cultural memory from the angle of individuality and brings up the idea of mediated memories which elucidates the inextricable interconnections between media and memory "at the crossroads of self and others, individual and collective, private and public"³⁸. She advocates mediated memories as both acts of memory and memory products that individuals produce and appropriate by means of media technologies to construct relational self-identities across the past, present, and future³⁹. Mediated memory acts and objects lie within a construal of the self with culture which is constantly prone to our perception of the relations with others and the society at large, and our projections of lived experiences in the course of time.

The emergence and prevalence of digital networked tools have knocked the established consensus that concerns "the materiality and embodiment of media technologies as well as the meanings arising from their use"⁴⁰, which may change our habits of presentation and preservation and our ideas about the way of remembering. The paper diary, weblog, and the video blog have much in common in terms of their use and function. A person's chronological observations, experiences, and reflections are recorded in written or digital forms, which is not limited to private use because of the potential to be read or watched by others. Also, the subjective emotions channelled through the visual or verbal languages can be contiguous and affectively resonate with "both the person experiencing the affect and in the observer"⁴¹. These memory items, whether analog or digital, share the same intention of expression, remembrance and emotional

³⁷ Garde-Hansen, *Media and Memory*, 39.
van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, 16.

³⁸ van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, 171.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

connectedness. As electronic self writing becomes a taken-for-granted everyday practice, but still not replacing the handwritten way of documenting life, the latter is gradually thought to be old-fashioned and disadvantaged in the convenience of its sharing. Upon distribution to the Internet, a weblog or video log entry can be sent to others in seconds and accessible to a potentially worldwide audience by just a click on the mouse. In contrast to the virtuality of digital writing and sharing and the magnitude of online circulation, a paper diary can represent the intimacy of holding a physical object in hand and sharing it within a closed social network. At the same time, it is arguable whether the differences between analog and digital in their modes of writing and sharing define what (part of) lived experiences people would like to memorize and expose, and what self-images people are likely to craft and even popularize beyond their intimate circles.

In essence, the way that individuals use media to recount their lived experiences (in other words, the act of remembering) is driven by their sociality. Online media seems to intensify sociality by providing an immediacy and a possibility for memories to encounter with more people, even anonymous audiences. Conversely, sociality can be imagined when people experientially encounter places and others' experiences manifested by the media. This is to approach cultural memory from another angle—collectivity. Alison Landsberg posits a prosthetic memory produced and disseminated by mass cultural technologies—cinema in particular—that generates a sensory experience of a past that people or their families did not live and provokes an ethical thinking of one's identity and previously accepted worldview⁴². In the act of sympathizing and empathizing, people can feel emotionally connected while recognizing the alterity since they are distant to the past which they did not live through. Sociality is implied in the process of people emotionally encountering and making meaning from the prosthetic memory, which, meanwhile, opens the door for a “new” collective past they can share.

The new not only means a new relation to a past they did not really experience but also implies possibilities for alternative understanding to the history. Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist* (2002) mediates the autobiographical memory of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Polish Jewish radio station pianist, during World War II. Its exhibition and distribution enable a transference of memory from a survivor to a spectator who has no link to a Holocaust past, and its digital circulation on streaming platforms unleashes temporal and spatial accessibility across generations.

⁴² Landsberg, 20, 149, 152.

In the meantime, there remains an argument regarding the authenticity of media representations of a historical event that leads to a growing concern on the manipulative power of popular cultural productions in shaping audiences' historical understanding⁴³. These disputes, in Alison Landsberg's perspective, suggest that prosthetic memories have a democratizing potential. The documentary *Absent Without Leave* retraces repressed memories of Malayan communists resisting the Japanese occupation of Malaya, engaging in an armed struggle to gain independence from British rule, but eventually being expelled from Malaysian society. It unearths an alternative history of Malayan communists, far from what they are represented in Malaysian national history. The film is forbidden to screen in Malaysian cinemas due to its communist overtones, but the ban has not stopped Malaysian audiences from getting access to it in other ways. The prosthetic memory about Malayan communists may point to the formation of political awareness in history writing among or beyond Malaysians across chasms of differences.

The connectivity within and between people, media technologies, and cultural productions across and beyond time and space may account for the struggle to dissect the complex relationship between media and memory, but it offers a holistic view that "sees both memory and media as constituted within and by the ecology of the day"⁴⁴. The digital omnipresence has witnessed that different media are intensively connected and that the content of media of the broadcast era is constantly remediated by other—increasingly mobile—media. The scan-and-search mode of audience engagement free from time and space⁴⁵ is therefore encouraged, but the lack of audiences' attention and deep or active engagement is inevitable. This can explain a negative association of media with mass-making memories that prosthetic aspects of memory are commodified as a means to attract more audiences' attention; it, on the other hand, directs a tendency of memory mobility based on the hyperconnectivity of the present across and beyond divisions of culture and region.

⁴³ Garde-Hansen, *Media and Memory*, 41.

⁴⁴ Andrew Hoskins, "The Restless Past: An Introduction to Digital Memory and Media," in *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, ed. Andrew Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10.

⁴⁵ Tara McPherson, "Reload: Liveness, Mobility, and the Web," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 204.

The Global Dynamics of Cultural Memory and Media

Evidently, the mobility or the metaphorical travelling of memory⁴⁶ can take place across time and space among communities that are not necessarily geographically or nationally bounded and that do not presume on their connectivity by forming affinities. In a constant process of mediation and remediation, mnemonic contents of a historical event such as the Holocaust travel from orality to writing to print, television, film, museum, and the Internet. The living experiences from survivors have been preserved in memory, and remembering and bearing witness to the Holocaust has been circulated in different contexts ranging from everyday interaction among different social groups to education and from bodily, sensuous experiences to transnational media reception, thereby making it an iconic example of immense human-made catastrophes in history. Despite its imagined global reach, there are tensions between Holocaust memory's ethico-political dimensions and its Western identity reconfigurations in its distribution, leading to a "broad range of localized appropriations"⁴⁷. Amos Goldberg's scholarship on Holocaust memory in the global age from a cultural-political perspective brings insights into how Holocaust memory is narratively interwoven with different national discourses in post-communist Europe and what contemporary European and Western identities develop from Holocaust memory. He aligns with the idea that the decontextualization and recontextualization of cosmopolitan Holocaust memory provides a framework for interpreting contemporary acts of injustice across the globe⁴⁸.

In this case, the historical Holocaust event is transformed into *les lieux de mémoire* that is represented again and again over the course of generations in different media and thus not necessarily attached to specific sites any more⁴⁹. Meanwhile, the dissemination and circulation of

⁴⁶ Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁸ Amos Goldberg, "Ethics, Identity, and Antifundamental Fundamentalism: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age (a Cultural-Political Introduction)," in *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, ed. Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 3-29.

⁴⁹ Pierre Nora, "General Introduction: Between Memory and History," in *Rethinking the French Past of Memory Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

Holocaust memory may generate a trans-ethnic solidarity while the nation-state framework of remembrance still exists. In other words, such mass-mediated memories are not definitely socially constructed, and people who acquire them may share little in their cultural or ethnic backgrounds and not claim any ownership. They are led to feel a connection to the past with different perceptions, but all the while they “remember their position in the contemporary moment”⁵⁰. As seen in empirical studies of Holocaust memory, the tensions and negotiations between the universal and the particular, between the cosmopolitan and the localized in the construction and distribution of memory reflect the restriction of methodological nation-state and nationalism to the field of memory research. It, therefore, encourages a transcultural or even a more radical transnational research perspective in the field of media and memory, which conceives cultural memory flowing across territorial, political and linguistic borders, in changing social, temporal and spatial contexts.

⁵⁰ Landsberg, 9.

Analysis: Contextualization, Decontextualization, and Recontextualization of *Chernobyl*

In 3440 IMDb reviews of *Chernobyl* from May 2019 to January 2023, most of them put emphasis on personal appreciation of the series, all the way from analytical reviews on its aesthetic style and/or acting to more emotional fans-based comments. Only around 5% of reviews either hold critical voices against English accents of characters or bluntly criticize the overdramatic and inaccurate representation of the historical Chernobyl incident. The series with the weighted average rating of 9.3 on IMDb is undoubtedly a highly-rated production for its cinematic qualities. The rating data collected by IMDb summarizes that the U.S., UK, Turkey, India, and Germany are countries with the most user ratings, and the reviewers are able to express their nationalities if they wish⁵¹. Although there could be found certain correspondences between the informed nationalities of reviewers and the way they formulate their interpretations of the series' reenactments, here the identities and cultural, social, or political positions are not considered as grounds to make further interpretations.

As this thesis aims to delve into the relationship between the personal and collective memories of the Chernobyl catastrophe and the reception of the *Chernobyl* series, the IMDb reviews which only concentrate on the series are filtered out. The main criteria of the subsequent review selection is whether personal resonances for the series are drawn from reviewers' memories of the historical Chernobyl incident and/or their associations with other issues. Eventually, 152 reviews are selected for close reading. Two main themes—reviewers' or their families' recollections of the Chernobyl disaster and aftermath, and their associations with topical issues—can be discerned from the selected reviews and thus become the ground for further classification.

From the three-step qualitative review analysis that I described in the methodology section, there emerge three logics of audience reception and interpretation in the end: contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization. Contextualization is the way that audiences base their interpretation of the series on its historical context. Decontextualization and recontextualization go hand in hand when it comes to audiences extracting a gist from the series

⁵¹ “Chernobyl Ratings,” IMDb, accessed October 12, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7366338/ratings/?ref_=tt_ov_rt.

and relating it to other topical issues. The former concerns the detachment of the series from its original historical context, and the latter refers to reusing the series to critically comment on current issues and to express the future outlook. The following discussion is organized around these three logics of audience reception and interpretation. The main point of the review analysis is to map out the similarities and differences of various audience responses to their Chernobyl memories and the representation of the historical Chernobyl event in the series from a case study of its IMDb reviews, thereby examining how audiences affectively and critically engage with the series.

Contextualization

Audiences differ in their relations to the Chernobyl incident represented in the series, resulting in a variety of meanings and experiences attributed to the series' representation of reality. The first part of the review analysis will be focused on how reviewers create sensuous and reflective experiences by engaging with the series in a historical context and revisiting the past through their senses, which I define as contextualization.

Senses of Time and Place

Observed from the selected reviews, more than half of the reviewers provide their intimate reminiscences of their or their families' lived experiences with a brief self-introduction of home country, age, family background and/or the living place (when the Chernobyl disaster happened). The recollections of their or their families' lived experiences are varied, including staying indoors and taking iodine tablets to protect themselves from radiation exposure, doing the cleaning for radioactive decontamination, touring the site of the Chernobyl incident, and watching news of the Chernobyl accident on television. Despite their different lived experiences, what their recollections have in common is their recognition of their temporal relation from the present to the past. They perceive a feeling of pastness by recalling their episodic memories of the Chernobyl events which they or their families experienced through, while locating the experience of presentness in watching the series:

I am from the balkans and my parents lived when this happened they told me how every day when they went on school they had to dring these iodine pills and how they weren't told why . Every

time i watched an episode the whole time i had goosebumps it was genuinely scary because it happened so recently the sound of the radiation counters the atmosphere the way the show was made just blows me away how good it is . It's as you can feel the radiation coming through the screen how horrible and scary that is . One of the best if not the best mini series i have ever watched !⁵²

My parents were located 120 miles north of the accident. Before any word got out, they told me they remember seeing a film of dust in the sky. Little after that - when word got out, everyone in schools - jobs - work, was told to drink iodine pills daily. It's crazy to see the accuracy of this show. I watched it with my parents and their eyes started to water because to this day they cannot believe this happened. It's the only show that leaves me wanting more.⁵³

The geographical locations or distances to the place where the accident took place indicated in the posts, such as Poland, Ukraine (“70 miles away from the Chernobyl Plant”⁵⁴), Latvia (“1000 km from Chernobyl”⁵⁵), the Netherlands, the UK, Turkey, the US, and South America, reflect the diversity of reviewers’ origins and cultural backgrounds. It also means that their emotive bonds and attachments to Chernobyl memories are not necessarily developed from the specific site of Chernobyl in Pripyat. They can feel a link to the site of Chernobyl through their experiential intimacy of witnessing a historical site/event both in real life and on screen, or recognizing “the cloth, items, buildings, furniture and the surroundings”⁵⁶ and people “who are devoid of individuality, who are homogenous and hopeless”⁵⁷ that are identical in materiality, color, and style from their memories. Also, some reviewers attribute the “1980’s socialist look”⁵⁸ and “grim

⁵² author: sgeorgiev-27388, 2 September 2019.

⁵³ author: markstech-49400, 28 May 2019.

⁵⁴ author: grozab, 7 June 2019.

⁵⁵ author: lailamasa, 16 June 2019.

⁵⁶ author: Shaytan, 14 July 2021.

⁵⁷ author: konstantinvitkin, 12 June 2019.

⁵⁸ author: nadaclontz-99-543764, 14 May 2019.

Soviet atmosphere”⁵⁹ to the milieu they sense form their memories and use it as a knowledge to examine the temporal and spatial context in which the series is set.

Presence and Emotions

As seen in the last section, audiences’ senses of particular time and place from the series is constructed upon references to their specific past activities, lived experience, personal and family memories and their perceptual process of identifying physical attributes of the environment. This creates a feeling of presence or a sense of being in the past in relation to their emotional engagement with the series, and there is a noticeable correlation between presence and negative emotions in the case of audiences’ reception and interpretation.

The series appears to provide audiences an outlet for the dread, horror, or trauma that come with the invisible threat of radiation and haunt in their mind from their previous experience and memories:

And now this series, four episodes of which I binge-watched yesterday, took me back to the eighties in the Soviet Belarus. I recognize everything in this half-docu, although I’ve never been to Pripjat. My mom is originally from a small town on the Dnieper - the mouth of the Pripjat river - in the Gomel region in the south of Belarus, and we used to visit it every year before the Chernobyl. Then we stopped, as we felt scared and cautious, and I went there again only when I was an adult. The series left me in tears. It all looks even more frightening than we could imagine.⁶⁰

As a 13 year old child I watched my father go through cancer treatment, the cancer was most likely caused by the radiation from the Chernobyl plant (cancer was extremely rare in Eastern Europe 15-20 years ago) where he was in the army at the time when the explosion happened. Despite my father getting ill I still saw the world through the eyes of an innocent child...

Now, my honest opinion: the mini series is nothing but perfection in terms of the location/ setting (it is exactly what Eastern European countries looked like back then), the strict policemen, the gas masks, the civilians etc. Having watched Chernobyl I now understand the awful consequences and

⁵⁹ author: stelmakh, 11 May 2019.

⁶⁰ author: rtatsiana, 29 May 2019.

what people had to go through, and some are still going through. Quite often I felt the pain of the people involved, and it almost felt I was there.⁶¹

Also, they are thrown into an experience of seeing the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which might make them feel that “watching it is more horrifying than living through it”⁶², sympathize with people who are affected by or even dead from radiation in the series and real life, pay a tribute to heroes who sacrificed their health or lives in the aftermath of the catastrophic nuclear disaster, or stricken with fear of all-that-could-have-been such as “an even bigger tragedy”⁶³.

Authenticity and Accuracy

The terms “authentic”, “authenticity”, “accurate”, and “accurately” are used in around 40% of the selected reviews to describe the series’ adherence to the established or agreed upon historical fact. These two different terms seem interchangeable but sometimes distinct in their use. Authenticity is a subjective measure of the audiences’ impression of whether the series capture the Soviet past of the 1980s with available evidence, and it is the same case with the use of accuracy:

The authenticity of detail in a (shot in West) movie amazed me: apartments interior, vehicles and their license plates, font and language of inscriptions, clothing and uniform, even knitted children’s mittens pattern - all genuinely bringing back my Soviet childhood.⁶⁴

I was born in Kyiv and I have never expected that this most tragic event in human history could be EVER recreated so well, so accurate and so detailed in a movie. As I watched the movie I had such feeling as I traveled by a time machine to those days -- so accurate any SINGLE AND SMALL

⁶¹ author: adata-45828, 7 June 2019.

⁶² author: curiosityonmars, 24 May 2019.

⁶³ author: kjnorman, 14 May 2019.

⁶⁴ author: vic_by 27, July 2019.

details was reproduced so precise: clothes, actors, streets, cars and their numbers ;), furniture...even bottles with glasses.⁶⁵

The series' capacity to concretize the zeitgeist of life in the Soviet Union down to details makes reviewers feel as if they were back to the past. In some cases, accuracy is, to a degree, measurable by the act of reviewers comparing the details they found in the series to those that have been uncovered by the historical research. They point out or even list the inaccuracies they are able to detect from the series, while not everyone is intolerant to its inaccurate depictions of reality:

As other reviewers already mentioned, I had noticed so far (3 episodes) only minor discrepancies in the overall image of the life in the USSR. People, behavior, political relations etc. Example of such a minuscule inaccuracy - officials, let alone common folks, didn't use "comrade" as frequently as it might seem from the episodes. It was very formal, official form of addressing. Usually, after first meeting, they addressed each other by the first AND middle name. In the military it was different – "comrade" + rank (as in modern Russia, BTW).⁶⁶

Examples: Legasov's notes were never secretly dumped into trash, Khomyuk character never existed, the Bridge of Death is an invented event, helicopter never crashed when dumping sand and boron onto exposed reactor (this happened much later when helicopter crashed into a crane that was installing the Shelter), there was no suicide mission to drain the water tanks, the Pripjat evacuation was not delayed, etc.

So many intentional inaccuracies and lies.

During Chernobyl events there were a lot of mistakes made, there were right decisions made, yet TV series focus is all black. Tens of thousands of engineers, specialists, able citizens, from all over Soviet Union, volunteered to help in Chernobyl clean-up effort, TV series never talks about that.⁶⁷

First off this mini-series gets about 90% of the real story right the rest of the 10% is all dramatization, it's incredibly accurate to what historical sources state.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ author: eduardshulzhenko, 28 September 2019.

⁶⁶ author: emholberg, 27 May 2019.

⁶⁷ author: Shaytan, 14 July 2021.

⁶⁸ author: spartan-18261, 5 June 2019.

I guess there are some inaccuracies and overdramaticised villainy with some characters but the essence of all of it feels right.⁶⁹

The discussion on authenticity and accuracy in use concedes that the historical existence of the Chernobyl disaster contributes to audiences' belief in the series' authenticity or historical accuracy and that different audiences have their own frame of reference on which they base their interpretations of the series' representation of reality. At the same time, they are inclined to reveal their European national and cultural backgrounds and Chernobyl-relevant memories to support their claims on the series' authenticity or accuracy. Furthermore, whether the series is of documentary value is remarked upon by 13 reviewers, derived from their perceived realism of the series, in other words, their judgment of the series's authenticity and accuracy to the history.

Knowledge and Factuality

The sections above address that the social knowledge of the historical background of the Chernobyl incident reviewers gained from their relevant experiences and memories serves as a criteria for them to evaluate the series' representation of reality. Additionally, there are some reviewers who evaluate the series as informative and educational, and not popular. They count and trust the series as factual content which contains physics knowledge, demonstrates the result of ideological dominance over science, shows the life and system of the Communist Bloc, or educates people about a historical lesson of the Chernobyl tragedy. This might lead to two different opinions towards the series. One is the series' clarion-call against the totalitarian Soviet Union and the Russian society of the present, and the other one is the criticism of the series' put-down of communism. There are also minority of reviewers who recognize the series' replication of "the cultural and political atmosphere of that time"⁷⁰ but consider the series as an entertainment. Such seemingly conflicting ideas reflect part of audiences' critical engagement with the series' crossing boundaries between fact and fiction:

This should be the take away lesson from this. The lies are still there. My family escaped from communism. I was alive during the time, I was young but vividly remember how things were and

⁶⁹ author: mail-shadow, 4 April 2022.

⁷⁰ author: aaalllrrraamm, 6 June 2019.

this mini series portrays them to the T. Please watch this and if you are living in the USA or any free country take a moment to appreciate how lucky you are. I recommend listening to the podcast for this too... Its a great lesson for history in addition to being highly entertaining.⁷¹

Entertainment, horrors, lies of all type, propaganda, points of view, but not the TRUTH. Truth is shocking. Especially if you live in fairyland with unicorns crapping rainbows. I was born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1977. 70 miles away from the Chernobyl Plant. So I remember life in USSR very well. I never thought I will ever see true Soviet Union on TV. The real one. Not Russian nostalgia, not American stereotype. And this is it... Down to the tinniest detail like hair style, license plates and even right facial expression of certain people⁷²

At the point of reception, audiences are immersed in the experience of watching the series and take their prior knowledge to the present experience. They have a general understanding that the series is based on degree of fact but engage with the factuality differently. Some reviewers reflect on the intermediate space between fact and fiction in the act of classification as illustrated in the previous section of reviewers' judgment on the series' authenticity and accuracy, and some of them even bluntly point out the entertaining nature of the series' reconstruction of the past. There is also another relationship between audiences and the series built upon the expectation that the series can use facts to tell people something. It can be argued that the hybridity format of the series makes audiences caught between responding to the series from a factual perspective, judging the series' representation of reality with their pre-existing knowledge and experience, and responding from an entertainment perspective.

⁷¹ author: email-24852, 4 June 2019.

⁷² author: grozab, 7 June 2019.

Decontextualization and Recontextualization

The previous part of the review analysis has discussed how audiences' senses of time and space are constructed, what perception they have towards the series' representation of reality, and how they respond to the series' factuality, in the process of contextualizing the series with its historical backdrop. The following part will give attention to how audiences use the series as a lens through which to view current issues and express their outlooks for the future, and I call this decontextualization and recontextualization.

System and Government

The system and government is a recurrent topic in nearly one-sixth of the selected reviews that reviewers extract from the series, and either word is often associated with lies or human factors. Most of them think the Soviet political system and government deserves the blame for the Chernobyl disaster, in other words, the tragedy is the result of a uniquely Soviet "systematic collapse"⁷³. However, it is only the Soviet system few reviewers reckon that made the evacuation and clean-up well organized:

I need not describe the narrative details as other already have done, but only commemorate the incredible sacrifice made by all these men and women caught in a system grinding them to pieces a little more every day, yet having the clarity and spine to do this for all our sake. It's heartbreakingly well depicted and should be obligatory watching for anyone contemplating the positives of authoritarian regimes.⁷⁴

Blame the Soviet system? I am afraid to imagine what would happen if the accident occurred in the period after the collapse of the USSR. It seems to me that there would just be panic, chaos, and as always: we don't have money in the budget for this. Ukraine itself would not have coped with a catastrophe of this level. Modern Ukraine, the EU, and the USA, including, forgetting now about the liquidators and victims of the Chernobyl accident, only prove this. God forbid, this is today, thousands of people would have been buried there at once.

⁷³ author: obersturmbahnfuhrer, 15 May 2019.

⁷⁴ author: drex110, 6 June 2019.

Then the evacuation was so organized that I still admire the Soviet discipline.⁷⁵

The enduring problems of system and government apparently loom large in reviewers' minds, as seen in their permissive "it still happens" attitudes. Through the lens of the series, some reviewers consider the consistency of the Soviet system to today's Russia and disapprove of the act of Japan releasing Fukushima nuclear wastewater into the ocean:

We (Russia, Ukraine, Bielorrussia) should have filmed it ourselves, but sadly it seems that at this stag (and it's a shame) we are not able to deal with this topic with the same level of honesty.. Because, sadly again, not much has changed here (I mean Russia at least) since 1986, except for the country name: the people are still heroic, and the system still fails and lies. All in all, this movie (I cant call it a "series") should be seen by every person on Earth, and I'm truly grateful to HBO for their extraordinary effort.⁷⁶

2 consequences can be drawn: 1, the show is stellar and the truth is so much out that it could terrify those who still want to conceal this story, and 2, it means not much have changed in Russia since 1986 which is the most scary aspect. Their endeavors to recreate the show in their political favour demonstrates that what the show states about the USSR is still valid to modern day Russia.⁷⁷

"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." This drama is full of lies that audience could hardly see the truth. The fact is bureaucracy of former USSR did cause the disaster, those officers and soldiers who rushed to rescue are true heroes. If they are not then look at Japanese facing Fukushima. It is still pumping tons of radioactive water into Pacific today. If you are lucky you may eat some radioactive sea food from there.⁷⁸

Thousands of soviet heroes gave their lives and health for the safety of millions more others. Yet they are mocked on screen. The Japanese government decided to throw billions of people's health in the gutter for the reason of COST-SAVING but was praised for being transparent. Relying on

⁷⁵ author: blackaconit, 9 January 2023.

⁷⁶ author: geogeosmookie, 6 June 2019.

⁷⁷ author: NoFarewell, 7 June 2019.

⁷⁸ author: libin72-50-44920, 26 May 2019.

the research and reports from a disgraced corrupt corporation who caused the accident in the first place is not transparency. It's a LIE.⁷⁹

Also, there are other reviewers in late 2020 regarding the Soviet government's response to the Chernobyl incident as a mirror and criticizing the American way of coverups to cope with the coronavirus pandemic:

Don't get me wrong, Chernobyl is still far worse than the Covid. Although, Covid has emerged shortly after the show, that is just one example, the US has many coverups of their own. The truth is the ideology has nothing to do with the disaster, it is the culture. At least Russians downplayed the disaster for their national pride, which, of course, is wrong, but the Americans downplayed the virus for the market and the rich got richer while the rest of us got even poorer...⁸⁰

By the way, the lies and deception of the Soviet government reminds me of what we're experiencing with the coronavirus in the USA. Doctors and scientists are trying to get the truth out there only to be stymied by the current administration. Hopefully, that will change soon.⁸¹

Nuclear Power

Nuclear power is another recurring topic in the selected reviews. Reviewers express their concern that a nuclear incident "will inevitably happen again, perhaps at many times and places"⁸² by reference to the Chernobyl disaster, Fukushima nuclear accident and/or Three Mile Island, and their long-existing environmental impact:

Chernobyl has left entire regions uninhabitable for literally thousands of years. Fukushima has just passed the eight year mark, still not resolved, and still contaminating the Pacific. Yet, our mentally ill species still clings to nuclear power.⁸³

⁷⁹ author: CiaoChao, 23 April 2021.

⁸⁰ author: utku_kamil_ozen, 21 September 2020.

⁸¹ author: kagonz, 13 November 2020.

⁸² author: zippyflynn, 28 May 2019.

⁸³ author: knifemagnet, 9 May 2019.

Since the accident occurred only 33 years ago, the secondary disasters caused by it still affect the local environment. Throughout history, it is not difficult to find traces of human self-destruction. From the two world wars to the invention and use of nuclear weapons, although nuclear power plants are regarded as the positive application of this super power, from Chernobyl to Fukushima, the shadow of nuclear power plant accidents has always hung over the heads of human beings.⁸⁴

The Chernobyl and other nuclear incidents in history imprint themselves on reviewers' consciousness as proof that nuclear safety is an oxymoron and that nuclear power may be beyond human's control. The fear of nuclear power leads to some reviewers calling for its termination or replacement, while some reviewers are afraid that the series gives misleading information about nuclear power:

When watching this series please do not forget that there are many ways to do nuclear energy and that the RBMK reactor design at Chernobyl would never have been allowed to operate anywhere else in the world due to its design flaws.⁸⁵

As you can see, some of the believes that the HBO miniseries teaches can be quite harmful and are solely based on unscientific fear about radiation and nuclear power. Not to mention that the rejection of nuclear power today (which is one of the cleanest, safest, cheapest and best energy sources) and the consequent use of coal and gas, prolongs the reduction of carbon gases and will lead to a larger fallout of global warming, which is part due to propaganda pieces such as this.⁸⁶

Reviewers tend to have the idea of historical recurrence on the matter of system and government, and nuclear power. They detach the Chernobyl incident from its specific historical time and space and place it into a grander picture with their understanding of the present and visions for the future, in terms of systematic and governmental problems and nuclear safety.

⁸⁴ author: j-70786, 21 May 2020.

⁸⁵ author: spartan-18261, 5 June 2019.

⁸⁶ author: roundtablet, 4 March 2022.

To Remember

As discussed in the section of contextualization, the mediated Chernobyl disaster and the concrete objects representative of the Soviet past in the series serve audiences as substitutes or triggers for memories of the disaster and historical surroundings which are personal but also collective. The vivid detailed description of what reviewers did to block nuclear radiation not only show diverse nuances in their memories but also indicate a shared memory of how they dealt with the threat of radiation. Also, their feelings of dread, horror, or trauma from their lived experiences and memories of the incident or visit to the site of Chernobyl are transferred to their emotional engagement with the practice of viewing the Chernobyl disaster and aftermath on the screen. The remembrance of Chernobyl is evoked and strengthened by taking a similar time travel experience with their familiar pasts.

Another way of remembering the Chernobyl tragedy is learning from it. Reviewers see the series as an informative and educational material of the historical Chernobyl event. For audiences who are not familiar with the incident, the series can be a supplement to provide them knowledge, and it is possible for them to sympathize and empathize with people in the series and real life who suffer from the pain due to radiation exposure. The Chernobyl memories are possibly portable and transportable to a larger public in the global distribution and dissemination of the series, no matter whether they had lived through the relevant past. Besides, the decontextualization and recontextualization of the Chernobyl memories provide a framework to interpret the crisis management of a political system and government with a nuclear accident and the emerging pandemic. The physical impact, in respect of health and environmental effects, portrayed in the series, give a warning about nuclear safety. The historical lessons about the cost of lies and the unforeseen problems of nuclear power, from reviewers' perspective, can be applied to different societies, which harnesses the potential of Chernobyl memories as a means of prevention or deterrence for the future.

Conclusion

I embark on this journey of memory and media with three signposts departing the matter from different directions. José van Dijck uses mediated memories to explore the formation of self identity and the self relationship with others in the process of remembering and forgetting. In contrast, Alison Landsberg approaches cultural memory from the perspective of collectivity. She posits a prosthetic memory, a form of privately felt public memory that the technologies of mass culture make accessible for anyone, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, to share. Such memory is arguably assimilated as a sensuous personal experience of a historical event through which they did not live. This also presents a picture of the mobility of memory. Astrid Erll further sees memory travelling across borders, changing meanings and interpretations based on or beyond the nation-state framework given in the travels. Standing on the shoulder of these theories, I am able to understand the entanglement of personal and collective memories, and emotional resonance with the mediated past in the process of audiences from different countries and cultural backgrounds engaging with the *Chernobyl* series.

My research aim was to investigate the dynamics of Chernobyl memories in audiences' reception and interpretation of the series through the lens of its IMDb reviews. Therefore, I selected and did close reading of 152 reviews from May 2019 to January 2023 whose content is not centered around the series only. Then I identified two recurrent themes in the selected reviews that addressed my first research question. The found themes are reviewers' or their families' lived experiences and memories about the Chernobyl incident, and their concerns on the topical issues. Underlying the themes, three logics can be summarized that reviewers use to interpret the series. The first one is contextualization where reviewers put emphasis on the historical context of the series and the Chernobyl accident and evaluate the series' representation of reality. This dealt with my second research question about the roles played by individual and collective memories of the Chernobyl disaster in the reception and interpretation of the series. Audiences' relevant lived experiences or memories act as references for them to construct a temporal relation from the present to the past and a spacial connection to the site of Chernobyl, and they become a criteria for audiences to measure the series' authenticity or accuracy to the historical nuclear disaster. The other two logics of audience interpretation emerging from the qualitative review analysis further direct me beyond the research questions I asked in the beginning. There is a tendency of audiences

decontextualizing and recontextualizing the series and the Chernobyl disaster which are thus detached from specific time and space. They are tapped by audiences to comment on the current issues of problems with politics and nuclear safety.

Stories regarding the effects of radioactive fallout and iconic objects of the 1980s Soviet Union are conflated into the series. It can be perceived that the series preserves and concretizes Chernobyl memories as resonated in many audiences, while it is not a static, fixed repository or a storehouse of those memories because audiences give different emotions, thoughts, associations or images when encountering it. The selected reviews and their analysis have shown the subjectiveness and diversity of audiences' interpretation of the series, and writing down their reviews on IMDb, I would argue, is also a way of sharing and possible collective remembrance. Their personal or families' memories come into the IMDb website and become shared, accessible to anybody around the world. Their impression on the Soviet past of the 1980s and recollections of the Chernobyl disaster share a common framework that can function in the formation of culturally shared narratives of the Chernobyl disaster.

Approaching audience reception and interpretation from an empirical perspective, this review analysis of *Chernobyl* affirms that audiences' engagements with the series are not only affective but also critical, given that there is an ambivalent identification process where audiences spatially, experientially, sensuously juxtapose and align themselves with the series while differentiating themselves from it. Audiences, especially those who declare themselves from former communist countries in Europe, evaluate the series' factual content by comparing what they remember about the Chernobyl incident and the Soviet era to what is represented in the series. Their evaluation of the series' authenticity and accuracy, at the same time, implies their awareness of the fictional nature of the series. In this sense, it departs from the idea that derivations from reality caused by audiovisual and narrative techniques and strategies in the series may be a direct threat to the social perception of the historical Chernobyl disaster⁸⁷.

⁸⁷ “Cuando se trata de un cine histórico, biográfico, basado en hechos ‘reales’, su potencial es tal que es capaz de modificar la percepción social de la realidad.” Beatriz Correyero-Ruiz and Josefina Sánchez, “El acceso a la ‘verdad’ a través de la ‘ficción’ en Chernobyl. El delirio del relato en la hipermodernidad [Access to ‘Truth’ through the ‘Fiction’ in Chernobyl. The Delirium of the Story in Hypermodernity],” *Historia y Comunicacion Social* 27, no. 1 (2022): 253-65.

The review analysis has also favored a cultural and transnational outlook. Reviewers present an intellectual, informed self who comment on the series' representation of reality and topical issues of politics and nuclear power with reference to their Chernobyl memories. The personal and cultural bind together in the acts and reviews of remembering in which they engage to "make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their surroundings, situating themselves in time and space"⁸⁸. This enriches the perspective to the field of IMDb review research by looking upon how reviewers construct their temporal, spatial, and emotional connections to the Chernobyl incident and express their future outlooks for relevant issues. The distribution and circulation of the series on streaming platforms make it accessible to global, transnational audiences. Though the series and memories of the Chernobyl can not resonate with the same salience, let alone meanings, for different audiences, the past-present-future nexus reviewers make in the decontextualization and recontextualization of the series bring light to the possibility of the Chernobyl evolving from an (east-)European concern to a universal code for systematic problems and nuclear safety. It challenges the methodological nationalism in memory studies which looks at the nation-state as a social framework of remembrance and acknowledges the nation-transcending potential of Chernobyl memories.

To further investigate the transnational audience responses to the series, I would suggest conducting semi-structured interviews with voluntary participants who have viewed the series as the study of its IMDb review analysis has displayed some limitations. Even though many reviewers generously express their nationalities and cultural backgrounds in the reviews, the anonymity guaranteed by the IMDb system disallows me to know about their personal information. The results could have been enriched if their social backgrounds and watching preferences were considered. The sample of participants is inevitably selective, but the interviews with them can provide supplementary and detailed information about whether and how they contextualize, decontextualize, and recontextualize the series in the process of their engagement. More non-European narratives and memories of the Chernobyl incident and the era can be possibly brought up, and it can foster better understanding about the differences of the effects of audiences' cultural backgrounds on their reception and interpretation of the series.

⁸⁸ van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, 6.

Lastly, the transnational audience responses to *Chernobyl* bring us back to the opening quote, an excerpt from Svetlana Alexievich's book *Voices From Chernobyl*—that the long comet tail of the deaths and suffering of the Chernobyl era is ever visible today. It looms above us, together with the series underscoring the terrible impact of the disaster, no matter if we had lived through that past. Meanwhile, our connection to Chernobyl is bridged or strengthened by the series, making us feel part of the Chernobyl history and a collective social responsibility to remember it. While we remain skeptical about non-repetition of similar disasters in the future, the remembrance and reflection of Chernobyl may have the power of hope for change.

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