The iron screen: An ideological analysis of the discourse on Russia through the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl

In TV fiction, over the past years, it has been possible to detect the recuperation of specific themes linked to a particular sociopolitical context: the Cold War. The Russians and the Soviet era are becoming gradually more commonplace in highly popular television serial narratives like the miniseries *Chernobyl* (HBO/Sky UK, 2019). Accordingly, the main aim of this paper is to determine how its discourse is constructed and its relationship with the television industry and the current sociopolitical reality in the United States. The ultimate intention is to reflect on how TV fiction has become a valuable benchmark for gauging the situation of a specific society and how it has contributed to constructing its collective imaginaries.

Keywords: nuclear disaster; Chernobyl; television series; ideology; Cold War

Introduction

Political and ideological content has formed part of the discourse of fiction not only in the literary field but also in the different broadcast media. In this connection, some authors have stressed the cultural significance of the stories told on television and the valuable material that they provide "[…] for understanding the world we live in" (Buonanno, 2007, p. 72). In this sense, TV series link up with political communication and serve as frames of reference that generate cultural representations and significations (Selva, 2016). In the twenty-first century, furthermore, such an appalling event as the September 11 attacks was described by the press and the public at large as a catastrophe that "looked like a movie" (Semati, 2002, p. 213), becoming, from a geopolitical and cultural point of view, a "lethal and monstrous moment of blockbuster imagination" (Semati, 2002, p. 214). In this vein, the threatening figure of "the Other", of the enemy who undermines the cornerstone of democracy in the United States and, by extension, the West, reappeared in the film and television discourse after the September 11 attacks.

However, that event would recall other major chapters in the history of the United States and the Americans, with an impact on topics addressed by the film and television industries such as the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945), the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the Cold War (1945-1991). These ideological struggles and political tensions have surpassed the world of fiction, contributing to construct collective imaginaries grounded in these discourses. Linked to the twentieth-century discourse on the Cold War, in 2019 (May-June) the channel HBO broadcasted the miniseries *Chernobyl*, created by the American comedy scriptwriter and director Craig Mazin.

With *Chernobyl*, Mazin jumped on the bandwagon of TV fiction series whose plots contained references to the Soviet era, including the third season of the sci-fi and

fantasy series *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) and other more political dramas like *Deadly Class* (Syfy, 2018-2019). As with these examples, among others that will be discussed further on, *Chernobyl* is set in a historical period that US fiction has apparently been unwilling to renounce. Well-received by the critics, it was announced the winner of 4 out of the 19 Emmy Award nominations (Chaney, 2019) and the highest ever score – to date – for a TV fiction series on the digital platform IMDb (Shramovych & Chornous, 2019) have demonstrated that slinging mud at the Eastern Bloc is still popular with audiences. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to determine how the discourse of this historical drama has been constructed and its relationship with the television industry and the current sociopolitical reality in the United States.

Construction of the sociopolitical imaginary through TV fiction

Anderson (1993) coined the term "imagined communities" to describe how nations are built on the basis of mental images. In this regard, the majority of citizens only have direct experiences with a limited range of political activities and institutions in modern politics. As a result, the mass media, like the press and, to a greater extent nowadays, television, inevitably intervene in many political developments and processes. Thus, the mediated images that they convey give us an idea of our environment: we imagine and create communities that serve to explain how we function as a society and, moreover, who we are and what we do as a group (van Dijk, 2009). It is also of interest to note that these mental images do not remain in the abstract dimension: they guide the actions that will be subsequently performed. Correspondingly, this social imaginary is a representation that ordinary people make – about themselves and their surroundings – and which is expressed using symbols, icons, stories, or legends (Taylor, 2006). In this context, mass entertainment and culture play a special role, for cultural citizenship is "the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is

implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture" (Hermes, 2005, p. 10).

In particular, Askanius (2019, p. 273, original emphasis) contends "that popular culture can work as a resource for *citizenship* and *civic engagement*." Back in 1999, Blumler and Kavanagh had already developed the premise that entertainment per se was destined to become a new form of political communication. Street (2000), who is of the same mind, claims that politics and entertainment are both capable of engaging an audience or people who share their fears or hopes and laugh at their jokes. So, owing to the fact that both mass culture and politics create works of fiction with the ability to portray believable universes in order that audiences should identify with them, "It is by now a well-established argument that TV entertainment and popular culture in general, however indirectly, play an important role in how we piece together the puzzle of our political subjectivities" (Askanius, 2019, p. 273).

In this respect, the production of the TV and film industries is especially important from a geopolitical perspective, due to the fact that it helps to project a particular image to a group linked to a specific ideology or to an entire nation. Fiction products thus make it possible to exercise what is called "soft power" (Nye Jr., 2004), maligning or extoling a specific collective in terms of how its narrative has been constructed. This aspect would convert those products into indicators of "the debates that concern our society" (Moïsi, 2017, p. 21). Therefore, if "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1993) live in the mind of each compatriot, cinema and mass culture in general serve as constructs to forge community ties.

The study of these mass media channels is interesting because it may help us to gain a deeper understanding of how homogeneous social blocks are formed: "Television

is part of a complex social environment in which other important institutions have roles as nation builders" (Castelló, 2009, p. 306). In this sense, for Lipschutz (2001) the products of mass culture have two functions in particular: reflexive and disciplinarian. The reflexive function involves the way in which they reflect the society that they intend to describe (even in a distorted manner) and, at the same time, it allows us to view our society as external observers and knowledgeable participants. On the other hand, they are disciplinarian in the sense that they also establish the limits of the socially acceptable and warn us about what may happen if we overstep them.

The Cold War reflected in TV fiction

The two functions described above, i.e. reflective and disciplinarian (Lipschutz, 2001), have served to consolidate the so-called "Western society", understood as a group of countries that, albeit geographically separated, share a more or less uniform economic and cultural system (Huntington, 2006). A term that proved to be essential during the Cold War, because Huntington's (2006) basic premise is based on the continued existence of those cultures with affinities and the destruction of all those civilizations that do not share the same vision. For which reason, "we can analyze popular fiction as a microcosm of the way American cultural hegemony functioned in the world" (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 776).

In the construction of these opposing visions, the sociopolitical reality of the United States has always been reflected in an apparent or veiled manner in the country's film and TV productions, selecting certain genres to portray those fears, anxieties, and social concerns shared by the audience. Ergo, the contribution of its TV and film industries to the construction of collective imaginaries and their use as an influential medium for conveying specific messages to the public at large have been particularly

important in times of war or during international political conflicts. It is not for nothing that the Cold War has also been dubbed the "cultural Cold War" (Swift, 2003), owing to the use of culture in its different manifestations (television, cinema, literature, sports, etc.) to transmit a specific image of "the Other". As Swift (2003, p. 67) remarks, "Cultural competition is relatively inexpensive; it can attract a worldwide audience and does not risk escalation to nuclear war." In other words, governments resort to the arts to project an image of moral superiority over their adversaries both at home and abroad. This is why many US filmmakers and writers depicted the Soviet Union "[…] as drab, with people afflicted by poor wages and housing, downtrodden by Communist officials and longing for the freedom and consumer luxuries of the west" (Swift, 2003, p. 67). While their Soviet counterparts painted a picture of the United States as a country "[…] torn with class divisions; a cultural desert where racism and poverty was the norm for most and crime and violence a way of life" (Swift, 2003, p. 67). The intention was to drum up the support of the citizens themselves and to win over the opposition and fence-sitters in neutral countries.

The Western and Eastern Blocs, which since the Cold War have vied with each other on the geopolitical and cultural stages to gain an edge over one another, have been placed in these conflicting positions. In the specific case of the West, some years ago Tunstall (1977) argued that the United States had globally propagated its ideology through the media, underscoring the alliance between the US administration and the film industry that, in exchange for subsidies and favorable legislation, spread the "American way of life" – an idealized vision of capitalism that everyone would want to imitate – to the four corners of the world (Guback, 1977). This was not limited to extoling one's own system, but also involved demonizing one's adversaries. During the period between the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the

interests and fears of the two blocs were conspicuously represented in mass culture. For instance, the American allegory *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), in which a US citizen is horrified when his neighbors are possessed by aliens who deprive them of their free will (Lipschutz, 2001). This would be one of many films that would resort to science fiction as a way of reacting to the developments of those years, mainly the fear of nuclear war, the rise of totalitarianism, and the dread of being invaded (Seed, 1999, p. II). These subjects were broached employing a doomsday discourse, with superweapons, giant creatures, etc., already existing in 1945 or thereabouts. So, the Cold War "was reinforcing already existing imagery" (Seed, 1999, p. 12). According to Swift (2003, p. 67), "On the whole, America seems to have had the advantage in the cultural Cold War". With respect to the evolution of the figure of the enemy, Booker (2006) refers to the observations made by the cultural historians Slotkin (1988) and Engelhardt (1995) about the prediction that, once the Cold War was over, this would acquire new connotations in American fiction. In the sci-fi genre, for example, films like *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997) were proof of the quest for new enemies to defeat. In short, "the national identity of the United States has from the beginning been defined in opposition to enemies who could be construed as savage and evil" (Booker, 2006, p. 17).

Nonetheless, the fall of the Iron Curtain did not lead to a truce between the two blocs. Both continued to maneuver on the geopolitical chessboard to gain an advantage over the other, resorting to different techniques to that end. Both the Western and Eastern Blocs are persisting in the struggle framed in the current sociopolitical context. Accordingly, the Russian federal government, led by Vladimir Putin, is characterized by a way of looking to the future anchored in the past; namely, looking back on a glorified past – untainted by Soviet ideology – which holds the promise of recuperating the

country's former greatness (Vázquez Liñán, 2018). Therefore, under the aegis of an authoritarian capitalism (Vázquez Liñán, 2018, p. 144), Russia continues to oppose the West, which also maintains a hostile stance to safeguard its position. A struggle for primacy that finds its way into the media discourses of mass culture in the shape of indirect attacks aimed at discrediting the opponent.

An analysis of *Chernobyl*: merely the return of nuclear disasters to TV fiction?

The series starts on the night of April 26, 1986, when a chain of fatal errors and negligence provoked one of the most notorious nuclear disasters in history: a series of explosions destroyed No. 4 reactor of the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin nuclear power plant – close to Chernobyl – subsequently changing the lives of thousands of people forever. Notwithstanding the fact that Pripyat, where the ruins of the plant are located, will remain inhabitable for a very long time to come – estimates vary from several hundred years to several thousand (Møllera & Mousseaub, 2006) –, the city has not been consigned to oblivion, for the catastrophe is remembered in different ways within different genres both fictional, like the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (Bradley Parker, 2012), and non-fictional productions including numerous documentaries such as *Chernobyl Heart* (Maryann DeLeo, 2003), *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* (Anne Bogart, Holly Morris, 2015), or *The Real Chernobyl* (2019).

The aim pursued in studying the miniseries *Chernobyl* is not to ponder on the causes or consequences of the nuclear accident – the facts and repercussions are beyond scientific doubt – but to analyze an America TV fiction product that portrays a disaster described by Mikhail Gorbachev, the former general secretary of the Soviet Union, as one of the causes behind the union's dissolution:

The nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl 20 years ago this month, even more than

my launch of *perestroika*, was perhaps the real cause of the Soviet Union's

collapse five years later. Indeed, the Chernobyl catastrophe was a historic

turning point: there was the era before the disaster, and there is the very

different era that has followed. (Gorbachev, April 2006)[1]

In other words, the importance of this accident in the context of international politics is associated with the progressive decline of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. In this vein, it is characteristic that in a period marked by geopolitical confrontation between the Russian Federation and the United States (and by extension their NATO allies), a television series is released that shows the fall of a large block that once competed with the West –as example of this rivalry, the East StratCom Task Force setting by the European Union up with the aim to face the fake news that comes from Russia (Press room European Parliament, 2019)–. If at the time of the accident, the West German Greens – then a fledgling political party – proclaimed, "Chernobyl is everywhere" (Jochum, 2006), in TV and film fiction the many productions placing Russia or the Soviet Union under a cloud of suspicion show that *Russia is everywhere*.

In current TV fiction, the figure of the Russian is still being used as the hero's adversary or the object of parody to dispel the tension in main plots. This is the case of *Stranger Things* (2016-), in which a group of teenagers manage to break the codes used

---

[1] This passage is quoted from Don C. Smith (2016). Mikhail Gorbachev direct reference, "Turning Point at Chernobyl" (April 14, 2006), has been consulted in the online media *Project Syndicate*. Accessed December 13, 2019. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/turning-point-at-chernobyl/spanish?barrier=accesspaylog. However, one of the phrases in the passage had been slightly modified: instead of "the real cause", the online text reads "the main cause."

by Russian scientists and military personnel at the company Hawkins Power and Light. This effect has also been achieved by introducing eccentric characters such as the extravagant Soviet appearing in the series *Deadly Class*. But the list does not end here. For example, Russia is also embodied by characters such as Viktor Petrov (with the same initials as Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation), who appears in the third and fourth seasons of *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018). Similarly, the "Russian theme" is also apparent in series like *Years and Years* (BBC One, 2019), *The Last Czars* (Netflix, 2019-), and the spy series *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018). In all of these productions, there are characters either from present-day Russia or the former Soviet Union, but the prototype does not vary. They are frosty figures who either work for the state or are characterized as the innocent victims of the powers that be.

In the TV miniseries *Chernobyl*, these clichés are slightly softened and the critical discourse on a chapter of Soviet history is constructed with narrative elements that offer a more complex interpretation of the Soviet Union. This narrative, which ceases to revolve around the classical dichotomy of good and evil, includes redeemed figures like Boris Shcherbina, a member of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union (hereinafter CPSU) and the vice-chairman of the Council of Ministers, or tragic heroes like the Soviet scientist Valery Legasov. However, the stereotyped image of the Russians is reinforced by the scenery, costumes, props…of this miniseries. "There are many stereotypes shown, typical of Western portrayal of the Soviet Union", like "a big cup, vodka, KGB everywhere", affirms Oleksiy Breus, engineer at Chernobyl and survivor of this catastrophe (in Shramovych & Chornous, 2019). On the other hand, the accuracy of the representation of daily Soviet relationships of power has been questioned (Braithwaite, 2019; Gessen, 2019). In this sense, for its critics, it is "[…] a plot to undermine Russia's current atomic agency" or

"'propaganda', blackening the image of the USSR and exaggerating the callousness of the Soviet response" (Rainsford, in BBC News, 2019). Likewise, as a result of the miniseries' international success[2], Russia announced an alternative version of the tragedy directed by Aleksey Muradov, based on the theory that the "[…] Americans infiltrated the Chernobyl nuclear power plant" (Muradov, in BBC News, 2019).

The controversy surrounding the miniseries has converted it into an interesting object of study not only for analyzing how it approaches the tragedy but also for decoding its discourse on the Soviet Union. It is with this purpose in mind that two of the narrative elements essential to the construction of the story (characters and settings, Casetti & di Chio, 1999) are analyzed below, without losing sight of the sociopolitical context of this TV fiction miniseries. These elements essentially are articulated between two main ideas that connect this TV fiction with present concerns, as it is detailed below.

Chernobyl: *the quest for the truth as the story's linchpin*

The series is based on one of the works that recounts this part of the story: the documentary book entitled, *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2016), written by the Belarusian journalist and Nobel Laureate in Literature Svetlana Alexievich. A novel dedicated to recording the voices of the forgotten in the wake of the disaster, those anonymous people who will have no place in the history books, but whose lives were changed drastically by the nuclear accident. One of those people is Lyudmila Ignatenko, the wife of Vasily Ignatenko, one of the firemen who arrived at the

---

[2] This miniseries has not only obtained a record-breaking score on the Western website IMDb (9.7) but has also been given a high rating on its Russian counterpart KinoPoisk (9.1) by Russians and Ukrainians who have watched it on the Internet (BBC News, 2019).

plant to extinguish the fire on that night in April. His story, as Ignatenko explains, is one of death and love, of uncertainty and certainty: "So that's my life. I'm living in a real and unreal world at the same time. I'm not sure which I like more" (Alexievich, 2016, p. 23). The second sequence of the first episode of Chernobyl starts with the story of Lyudmila and Vasily, thus showing that it is a story about workers and ordinary people whose lives were affected by the tragedy. The miniseries *Chernobyl* attempts to search for those responsible for the tragedy by offering viewers answers to why so many people lost their lives: "What is the cost of lies?" This is the first part of the question posed by Legasov at the beginning of the story, which continues as follows:

> It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories? In these stories, it doesn't matter who the heroes are. All we want to know is: "Who is to blame?" […] In this story it was Anatoly Dyatlov. He was the best choice. An arrogant, unpleasant man. He ran the room that night. He gave the orders. And no friends. At least, not important ones. And now, Dyatlov will spend the next ten years in a prison labor camp. Of course, that sentence is doubly unfair. There were far greater criminals than him at work. (1. "1:23:45")

After recording this statement with a radio cassette, Legasov commits suicide and then the events before and after the disaster are shown on screen: a combination of flashbacks and flash-forwards that illustrate how the plant's top management conducted the first nuclear tests before everything was ready, followed by the attempt to conceal the disaster and the consequences that this subsequently had for the population. In this sense, one of the threads of the story is Legasov, a member of the commission tasked with managing the nuclear accident and who confronted the Soviet apparatus to

demonstrate the system's flaws with the aim of preventing something similar from happening again.

Luke (1987, p. 354) explains how, during the months following the Chernobyl disaster, the news coming from both the Western and Eastern Blocs mythologized it in their own ideological interests: "Chernobyl has been framed ideologically to suit the dominant ideas of powerful elites." Indeed, both blocs, from different journalistic approaches, reached the same conclusion: "The mythologies of advanced industrial ideology used Chernobyl to reaffirm the impossibility of future human progress without more nuclear power" (Luke, 1987, p. 368). Moreover, nuclear power not only generated energy, but also "guaranteed" peace. In should come as no surprise then that *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* (Norris & Arkin, 1998) records a total of 2,051 nuclear tests conducted between 1945 and 1998, with the United States and the Soviet Union being responsible for 85 per cent of them. In the Cold War period, the Marshall Islands were used by the United States as a test site, causing untold environmental damage and causing those who decided to stay put life threatening diseases (Smith-Norris, 2016)[3]. Nonetheless, the Western Bloc is hardly mentioned in the specific case of HBO's miniseries. Indeed, the Western powers are only mentioned in relation to the concern raised by the photos of the plant taken by their satellites and to their intention to participate in the proceedings against the supervisors.

Why are some events collectively remembered, while others are consigned to oblivion? Vázquez Liñán and Leetoy (2016) explain how memory policies work: things are remembered and – in the main – forgotten collectively. In this regard, historical memory is a political project that is implemented in the present with future objectives in

---

[3] Concerning this observation, it is also recommended to consult Braithwaite, 2019, p. 156.

mind, generally relating to identity building and modifying or preserving a particular social imaginary, this "always being selective and expressed through a specific discourse" (Vázquez Liñán & Leetoy, 2016, p. 72). Thus, any framing in this field involves prioritizing reality and censoring that which has not been selected: "Therefore, insofar as the filter criterion is political, it leads to the promotion of some collective representations at the expense of others" (Vázquez Liñán & Leetoy, 2016, p. 72). The role of the cultural industry is, in this sense, decisive, and the majority of the major media conglomerates are either to be found in the United States or have strategic interests there (Tunstall, 1977; Chomsky & Hermann, 2009; McChesney, 2015). For instance, it is remarkable that in *Chernobyl* neither is there any mention of the nuclear accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant (Pennsylvania) in 1979 – where another chain of material and human errors was on the point of causing a full meltdown of reactor No. 2. – nor has it been made into a series (Bromet, Parkinson & Dunn, 1990; Hopkins, 2001). In the affected area, although it was never permanently evacuated, the mortality rate and the incidence of cancer are both higher than among the rest of the population (Talbott, Youk, McHugh-Pemu & Zborowski, 2003).

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the functions of Todorov's (2000) memory, who points out that the facts of the past can be remembered in two ways: through literal memory (which does not mean truth but a search for revenge) or exemplary memory, that which serves as mourning and reparation. Chernobyl recovers traces of the victims' memory through Svetlana Alexievich's novel; however, more than mourning and reparation for the victims, the story seeks a guilt. In this respect, the series could be described as an attempt at exemplary memory if it had pointed out the danger of the use of nuclear energy; nevertheless, the series blames on a corrupt political system, the soviet, which tended to lower costs causing the reactor to meltdown. So, if the creator of

Chernobyl states that he seeks to get the truth out of the disaster: "What I want people to consider is that it does not matter what we want to believe, and it does not matter what story we want the world to create, the truth is the truth" (Mazin, in Ruiz de Elvira, 2019); the version of the disaster which the series provides is far from the neutrality and truthfulness proclaimed by Mazin. As Braithwaite states, in the Soviet Union "by 1986 you would not end up with a bullet in the back of the neck, as both Shcherbina and Legasov seem to fear at various points in the series" (2019, p. 154).

Nonetheless, the series begs another interesting question: "What is the cost of lies?": Legasov's question should encourage us to reflect on a burning issue in the current sociopolitical context, in which post-truth has erased the line between true and false and baseless alternative facts are given credence (McIntyre, 2018). In McIntyre word´s the post-truth is a strategical tool which defends that data can always be nuanced. That not means that the people who use it do not believe in the facts, but that they only accept those that fit in with their ideology: "What is striking about the idea of post-truth is not simply that the truth is being challenged, but that it is being challenged as a mechanism for political domination" (2018, p. 28). Framing and deforming a reality (*Chernobyl* or the audiovisual productions mentioned above such as *House of Cards* or *Years and Years*) and ignoring others (nuclear accident of Three Mile Island nuclear power plant) is part of the game that leads us to the post-truth. Furthermore, this on-screen animosity is not a monopoly of the West. For example, in response to the American TV spy thriller series, *The Americans*, the Russians produced *Adaptation* (Адаптация, IMDbPro, 2017-2019), a satire in which an American agent tries to infiltrate Gazprom to steal strategic secrets. As it happens, Gazprom Media, one of the world's Russian with govern connections largest gas production corporations, was behind the series.

Chernobyl: *connecting nostalgia to the present situation*

In the age of "nostalgic fiction", nostalgia being, as Stefanie Armbruster (2016, p. 12) notes, "a decisive characteristic of contemporary television fiction", the central narrative of *Chernobyl* has dusted down the former enemy of the West, i.e. the Eastern Bloc, and relaunched it on the media scene, with the aim of reinforcing the bad image of the Soviet regime and exacerbating suspicions about the Russians. As Adam Piette asserts, "The Cold War continues to live and thrive within our collective imaginations as a security state hysteria" (2009, p. 2). To this end, in the miniseries the spotlight is placed on several main characters who, in the face of Soviet inoperability and lack of resolve, attempted to raise the alarm and to seek justice for those affected by the Chernobyl disaster, continuing with the criticism against the state apparatus oppressing the people.

Following with this idea, and contrary to solely evoking material elements such as fashion or cultural features existing on that period (Fred, 1977, p. 416), in *Chernobyl*, we find that nostalgia is fundamentally placed in dichotomous values linked to the figure of "the Other", incarnated by the CPSU's mechanics of power and dominance. Concerning "the Other", *Chernobyl* perpetuates the demonized portrait of Russia, not only for the Western countries but also inviting its own population to reflect on the idea they have of a certain historical passage, questioning the possible falsely uses of the past brought by nostalgia (Fred, 1977, p. 417). For this purpose, the plot revolves around three main characters, Legasov, Khomyuk[4] and Shcherbina, who reflect the self-deception towards the operating rules of the Soviet state not only against the catastrophe

---

[4] In *Chernobyl*, the scientist Ulana Khomyuk is an invented character that pays tribute to the dozens of scientists who helped Legasov to search for the real motives that caused the accident.

but also regarding CPSU's daily functioning. For instance, the redemption of the Minister Shcherbina is connected to his progressive acceptance and disillusionment of the corruption and ineffectiveness of the CPSU's political structure. On the other hand, Legasov and Khomyuk discover the concealment and non-transparency of the Soviet party in order to erase its managerial incompetence, unveiling the real villain of the story. With regard to this idea, the sociopolitical background which surrounded this nuclear disaster is portrayed in this miniseries by a corrupted CPSU, where the seek of power and dominance were the main values pursued by the principal members of this political formation. This portrait strengthens the idea of the failure of communist regimes. Nevertheless, it also connects nostalgia with present ideas that continuously threat the integrity of Western democratic political parties: power, domination and meritocracy are not just flaws of the past.

Conclusion

On the basis of the specific case of the TV miniseries *Chernobyl*, we have attempted to address in the twenty-first century issues inherent to the twentieth century. Anderson (1993) coined the term imagined communities to describe how nations are built on mental images; we have focused on how the *Chernobyl* series contributes to the narrative of "us vs them" in the construction of the so-called West (Huntington, 2006). In this sense, it is distinctive that in a period characterized by strategic political struggles between the Eastern and Western blocs both have taken up the audiovisual discourse demonizing or parodying the "other". In the specific case of the show under analysis, considering the reflexive and disciplinary functions of Lipschutz (2001), *Chernobyl* brings an external look to the nuclear conflict, but at the same time exempts the energy system from all blame and focuses on punishing the political system. Thus, *Chernobyl´s* narrative is reflective, because the gaze of the victims moves the spectator,

and disciplinary, because the gaze of guilt is directed towards the Soviet leadership. In this way, the HBO series is part of the "microcosm of the way American cultural hegemony *functions* in the world" (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 776).

References

Alexievich, S. (2016). *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*. London, UK: Penguin Random House.

Anderson, B. (1993). *Comunidades imaginadas: reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo* [Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and diffusion of nationalism]. Mexico City, MEX: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Armbruster, S. (2016). *Watching Nostalgia. An Analysis of Nostalgic Television Fiction and its Reception*. Bielefeld, DEU: transcript Verlag.

Askanius, T. (2019). Engaging with *The Bridge*: Cultural citizenship, cross-border identities and audiences as 'regionauts'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (3), 271-290. doi: 10.1177/1367549417722093

BBC News Mundo. 2019. "Chernobyl: cómo ven en Rusia la serie de TV (y por qué están haciendo su propia versión) [Chernobyl: how Rusia is portrayed in the TV series (and why they are making their own version)]." *BBC News Mundo*, June 8. Accessed October 1. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-48563198

Blumler, J. G. & Kavanagh, D. (1999). The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features. *Political Communication* 16 (3), 209-230. doi:10.1080/105846099198596

Booker, K. M. (2006). *Alternate Americas. Science Fiction Film and American Culture*. Westport, IRL: Praeger Publishers.

Braithwaite, R. (2019). Chernobyl: A 'Normal' Accident? *Survival* 61 (5): 149-158. doi: 10.1080/00396338.2019.1662152.

Bromet, E. J., Parkinson, D. K. & Dunn, L. O. (1990). Long-term Mental Health Consequences of the Accident at Three Mile Island. *International Journal of Mental Health,* 19 (2), 48-60.

Buonanno, M. (2007). *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories*. Bristol, UK: Intellect.

Casetti, F. & di Chio, F. (1999). *Análisis de la televisión: instrumentos, métodos y prácticas de investigación* [Television analysis: resources, methods and research practices]. Barcelona, SPA: Paidós Ibérica.

Castelló, E. (2009). The Nation as a Political Stage: A Theoretical Approach to Television Fiction and National Identities. *International Communication Gazette,* 71 (4), 303-320. doi:10.1177/1748048509102183

Chaney, J. (2019, August 29). Chernobyl Was the Easiest Thing Craig Mazin Has Ever Written. *Vulture*. Retrieved from. https://www.vulture.com/2019/08/craig-mazin-chernobyl-interview.html

Chatterjee, C. (2008). Transnational Romance, Terror, and Heroism: Russia in American Popular Fiction, 1860-1917. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (3), 753-777. doi:10.1017/S0010417508000327

Chernobyl. 2019. HBO/Sky UK. Produced by Craig Mazin. United States of America and United Kingdom.

Chernobyl Diaries. Directed by Bradley Parker. 2012. Los Angeles, CA: Alcon Entertainment.

Chernobyl Heart. Directed by Maryann DeLeo. 2003. New York, NY: Downtown TV Productions.

Chomsky, N. & Herman, E. S. (2009). *Los guardianes de la libertad. Propaganda, desinformación y consenso en los medios de comunicación de masas* [The guardians of freedom. Propaganda, misinformation and consensus in the mass media]. Barcelona, SPA: Crítica.

Deadly Class. 2018-2019. Syfy. Produced by Rick Remender and Miles Orion Feldsott. United States of America.

Dean, J. (2019). *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*. London, UK: Verso.

Dowling, D. (1987). *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster*. London, UK: The Macmillan Press.

Engelhardt, T. (2007). *The End of Victory Culture. Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Ford, D. R. (2019). *Politics and Pedagogy in the "Post-Truth" Era: Insurgent Philosophy and Praxis*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Fred, D. (1977). Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave. *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (2), 414-424. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1977.00414.x

Geraghty, L. (2009). *American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Gessen, M. (2019, June 4). What HBO's 'Chernobyl' got right, and what it got terribly wrong. *The New Yorker*, Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/what-hbos-chernobyl-got-right-and-what-it-got-terribly-wrong

Guback, T. (1977). "The International Film Industry." In G. Gerbner (Ed.), *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures* (pp. 21-40). United States of America: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Hermes, J. (2005). *Re-reading Popular Culture*. London, UK: Wiley Library.

Hopkins, A. (2001). Was Three Mile Island a 'Normal Accident'? *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 9, 65-72. doi:10.1111/1468-5973.00155

House of Cards. 2013-2018. Netflix. Produced by Beau Willimon. United States of America.

Huntington, S. P. (2006). *El choque de civilizaciones y la reconfiguración del orden mundial* [The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order]. Barcelona, SPA: Paidós.

Independence Day. Directed by Roland Emmerich. 1996. United States of America, CA: Centropolis Entertainment and Twentieth Century Fox.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Don Siegel. 1956. United States of America, CA: Walter Wanger Productions.

Jochum, K. (2006, April 26). East, West Germany Dealt Differently With Chernobyl. *DW*. Retrieved from https://www.dw.com/en/east-west-germany-dealt-differently-with-chernobyl/a-1981654

Lipschutz, R. D. (2001). *Cold War Fantasies. Film, Fiction and Foreign Policy*. United States of America: Rowman & Littlefield.

Luke, T. W. (1987). Chernobyl: The packaging of transnational ecological disaster. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (4), 351-375. doi:10.1080/15295038709360145

McChesney, R. W. (2015). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New York, NY: The New Press.

McIntyre, L. (2018). *Posverdad* [Post-truth]. Madrid, SPA: Cátedra.

Møllera, A. & Mousseaub, T. (2006). Biological consequences of Chernobyl: 20 years
on. *Trends in ecology & evolution*, 21(4), 200-207.
Doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2006.01.008

Moïsi, D. (2017). *La geopolítica de las series o el triunfo global del miedo* [The
geopolitics of TV-Series or the global triumph of fear]. Madrid, SPA: Errata Naturae.

Norris, R. S. & William M. A. (1998). Known nuclear tests worldwide, 1945-98.
Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 54 (6), w/p. doi:10.1080/00963402.1998.11456906

Nye Jr., J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York,
NY: PublicAffairs.

Piette, A. (2009). *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh
University Press.

Ruiz de Elvira, Á. P. (2019, June 7). El creador de 'Chernobyl' publica en Internet los
guiones de la serie a petición de los espectadores [The creator of 'Chernobyl'
publishes the scripts of the series on the Internet at the request of viewers]. *El País*.
Retrieved from
https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/06/05/television/1559727357_920246.html

Saunders, F. S. (2000). *The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters. The Cultural Cold
War*. New York, NY: The New York Press.

Seed, D. (1999). *American Science Fiction and the Cold War. Literature and Films*.
Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

Selva, D. (2016). Social Television: Audience and Political Engagement. *Television &
New Media* 17 (2), 159–173. doi:10.1177/1527476415616192

Semati, M. (2002). Imagine the Terror. *Television & New Media* 3 (2), 213-218.
doi:10.1177/152747640200300213

Shramovych, V. & Chornous, H. (2019, June 12). Chernobyl survivors assess fact and
fiction in TV series. *BBC Ukrainian*. Retrieved from
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48580177

European Union. (2019, January 27). EU to take action against fake news and foreign
electoral interference. *European Parliament News*. Retrieved from
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191007IPR63550/eu-to-take-action-against-fake-news-and-foreign-electoral-interference

Slotkin, R. (1988). *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century
American Culture*. Oklahoma, OKL: University of Oklahoma Press.

Smith, D. C. (2016). Editorial. *Journal of Energy & Natural Resources Law* 34 (3),
261-263. doi:10.1080/02646811.2016.1198971

Smith-Norris, M. (2016). *Domination and Resistance: United States and the Marshall
Islands during the Cold War*. United States of America: Hawaii University Press.

Starship Troopers. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. 1997. United States of America, CA:
TriStar Pictures, Touchstone Pictures and Big Bug Pictures.

Star Trek: The Original Series. NBC. 1966-1969. Produced by Gene Roddenberry.
United States of America.

Stranger Things. Netflix. 2016-. Produced by Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer. United
States of America.

Street, J. (2000). *Política y cultura popular* [Popular culture and politics]. Madrid, SPA:
Alianza.

Suppia, A. (2012). SF as Film Genre (1895-1960s). In L. Schmeink (Ed.), *A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction*, (pp. 1-17). Accessed October 1. http://virtual-sf.com/?page_id=336

Swift, J. (2003). *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of The Cold War*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Talbott, E., Youk, A. O., McHugh-Pemu, K. P. & Zborowski, J. V. (2003). Long-term follow-up of the residents of the Three Mile Island accident area: 1979-1998. *Environmental Health Perspectives* 111 (3), 331-348. doi:10.1289/ehp.5662

Taylor, C. (2006). *Imaginarios sociales modernos* [Modern social imaginaries]. Barcelona, SPA: Paidós.

The Americans. 2013-2018. FX. Produced by Joseph Weisberg. United States of America.

The Last Czars. 2019. Netflix. Produced by Adrian McDowall and Gareth Tunley. United States of America.

The Outer Limits. 1963-1965. ABC. Produced by Leslie Stevens. United States of America.

The Real Chernobyl. Directed by Stephanie DeGroote. 2019. United States of America and United Kingdom: Sky Atlantic/HBO.

The Twilight Zone. 1959-1964. CBS. Produced by Rod Serling. United States of America.

Todorov, T. (2000). *Los abusos de la memoria* [The abuses of memory]. Barcelona, SPA: Paidós.

Tunstall, J. (1977). The American Role in Worldwide Mass Communication. In G.

 Gerbner (Ed.), *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures* (pp. 3-12). United States

 of America: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

van Dijk, T- A. (2009). *Discurso y poder. Contribuciones a los Estudios Críticos del*

 Discurso [Discourse and Power. Contributions to Critical Discourse Studies].

 Barcelona, SPA: Gedisa.

Vázquez Liñán, M. (2018). Guerras de la memoria en Rusia: el Kremlin versus

 Memorial [Wars of memory in Russia: the Kremlin versus Memorial]. *Historia y*

 comunicación social 23 (1), 139-155.

Vázquez Liñán, M. & Leetoy, S. (2016). Memoria histórica y propaganda. Una

 aproximación teórica al estudio comunicacional de la memoria [Historical memory

 and propaganda. A theoretical approach to the communicational study of memory].

 Comunicación y sociedad 26, 71-94.

Years and Years. 2019. BBC One/HBO. Produced by Russell T. Davies, Simon Cellan

 Jones and Lisa Mulcahy. United Kingdom.