Peaceful atom, haunted legacy.

ECHOES OF WAR(S) IN CHORNOBYL DOCUMENTARIES

by **Stanislav Menzelevskyi**

abstract

From a cinematic perspective, the Chornobyl accident became one of the most generative episodes in Ukrainian film history. The explosion of Reactor No. 4 triggered an unprecedented surge in film production: between 1986 and 1998, around forty documentaries were produced, alongside only one feature film. This essay examines one of the earliest attempts to represent the disaster, Volodymyr Shevchenko's *Chornobyl. Chronicle of the Hard Weeks* (1987), now regarded as a key Chornobyl film. Focusing on its pervasive militarized rhetoric, the essay investigates how wartime language and memory structure the film's interpretation of what was fundamentally a civilian, technological catastrophe.

KEYWORDS: Chornobyl accident, Ukraine, cinema, war, chronicle, Shevchenko.

Nuclear power was indeed "born violent," as Robert Jacobs puts it, highlighting the scientific and technological continuity between military and civilian applications of the fission reaction.[1] Global narratives of a clear separation between military and civilian uses were largely rhetorical. Nuclear Power Plants (NPPs) and their reactors didn't appear as autonomous, "peaceful" technologies, but rather as byproducts of the larger technological system, the global nuclear arms race, and the post-WWII military-industrial complex that facilitated it. It is symptomatic that explicitly military-affiliated publishers issued some of the earliest popular Soviet books on atomic energy: the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy, and the Military Publishing House of the Ministry of Defense.[2]

WHILE SOVIET LEADERSHIP proclaimed the peaceful use of atomic energy a top priority in the mid-1950s, envisioning the USSR's global ideological leadership in developing civilian nuclear applications, they assigned all military ambitions to the "American war machine"[3] and "cruel and inhuman politicians"[4] of the West. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, cast as quintessential acts of imperialist violence, quickly became staple tropes across Soviet media.[5] The official bureaucratic formula for this peaceful technological transition to "atomic-powered communism"[6] was encapsulated in the slogan "may the atom be a worker, not a soldier," which circulated broadly across cultural and media landscapes.[7] Soon, these words would adorn a nine-story building in the center of Prypiat, and the atom was tamed to "work for communism," at least until 1986, when the atom for several years became a soldier once again, an enemy soldier.

This is precisely the soldier-worker/war-peace oscillation I would like to highlight in several Ukrainian documentaries about Chornobyl, which unexpectedly manifested the same umbilical connection between atomic technological ambition and militaristic discourse, drawing on the language and memory of wartime experience.

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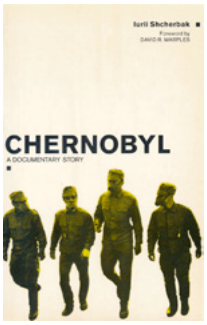
Chornobyl. Chronicle of the Hard Weeks, filmed by Ukrkinokhronika (Ukrainian Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio) in 1986, became not the first but subsequently canonical Chornobyl film, defining the representational strategies of the first post-accident years.[8] The filming of the accident appeared challenging for

Film stills from the documentary *Chornobyl: Chronicle of the Hard Weeks* (1986). Bottom left, the director Volodymyr Shevchenko.

several reasons. To start with, there was no iconic atomic mushroom cloud, no visual documentation of the explosion, only its aftermath – the ruins of reactor number 4. The subject matter seemed to be even more elusive: how to represent radiation that is "invisible" to the human eye, that has no color, odor, or any other perceptible form? On top of that, film directors faced not only party censorship, but also fundamental artistic and ethical dilemmas: how, if it were even possible, to represent the tragedy and narrate the trauma of such magnitude. "It's impossible to describe! It's impossible to write down,"[9] summarized the issue one of the disaster's witnesses. A similar imperative is given by journalist Anatolii Shymanskyi while recalling his immediate experience after Chornobyl: "Instead of writing, you should record. Document".[10] Eventually, Chornobyl raised a crucial question for the environmental humanities:

> **How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political interventions?**[11]

THE DOCUMENTATION SHAPED the post-1986 discourse, turning into a broader cultural phenomenon of the era; a mission and an obsession of Ukrainian intellectuals, a compulsive civilian and humanistic duty, performed in numerous iconic Chornobyl texts. For example, Iurii Shcherbak, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian environmental movement, confesses in his foundational book *Chornobyl: A Documentary Story* (1989) that after the accident, he was thinking of giving up writing because all "traditional literary forms, all the subtleties of style", all that seemed "artificial and useless" back then.[12] Instead, using a cinematic metaphor, he proposes to his readers an "assemblage" ("montage") of the documents and facts.[13]



Chornobyl: A Documentary Story by Iurii Shcherbak.

The Chornobyl experience seemed to slip away from symbolization. Yet the camera could still roll. Ultimately,

Chronicle... proposed a universal solution, the pathos of which is encapsulated in both the title of the film and the studio name – chronicle – implying the renunciation of artistic reflection in favor of straightforward documentation.[14] Catastrophic events indeed required urgent filmmaking. *Chronicle*..., contrary to the established logic of the cinematic production process, was greenlit by the studio without a script.[15] It sought to capture what was still too raw to narrate, documenting the events and lessons of the tragedy for future generations. Ultimately, chronicle documentaries became a dominating genre of the Chornobyl cinema in the few years after the accident. It was only in 1990 that the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv produced the first Soviet fiction film about Chornobyl – *Rozpad* (directed by Mykhailo Belikov).[16]

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The film crew began shooting *Chronicle*... on May 14, 1986, 18 days after the accident, missing the first stages of the containment efforts, when Mikhail Gorbachev broke the silence and mentioned the explosion for the first time during the TV address. By August 1986, the *Chronicle*... crew filmed around 20,000 meters (12 hours) of footage. Not until later did Shevchenko get to working on the script and voice-over narration with his regular collaborator, Ihor Malyshevskyi. Reflecting on their shared focus, the latter once confessed:

> **For some reason, I can so easily picture Volodia on a battlefield. Perhaps it's because most of what we created together was about the war.**[17]

Chronicle... was finished by October 3, 1986, and initially greenlit by the Soviet Goskino. Then the film was reviewed by USSR Gosatomenergonadzor (USSR State Committee on Supervision of Safe Conduct of Work in Atomic Energy). 152 remarks and four rounds of editing later, the film was shortened to less than an hour. The first public screening of the film took place at the Kyiv House of Cinema only five months later, on February 14, 1987, an event for which Shevchenko was released from the hospital, where he was receiving treatment for what was diagnosed as "bronchitis" caused by excessive radiation exposure.[18] The general public was able to view the film with an even more significant delay. Initially, there were only four distribution copies for the entire republic, reflecting state reluctance and the political tensions surrounding its subject matter.[19] The director Volodymyr Shevchenko died on March 29, 1987. According to the urban legend, his film camera has been buried as well, due to the inability to decontaminate the film equipment. Subsequently, *Chronicle*... was even – somewhat metaphorically – dubbed "the most dangerous film in the world".[20]

Ultimately, *Chronicle*... became *the* Chornobyl film, gaining significant festival circulation, critical recognition, and broad international television distribution.[21] In the years that followed, several industry awards were named after Shevchenko. Ranked 49th–50th in the top 100 Ukrainian films, the film solidified its lasting artistic and historical importance, as well as its influence on generations of Ukrainian and international filmmakers".[22]

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And here is the main question: how was *Chronicle*... organized and rhetorically designed to position its audience in ways that secured such acclaim? Compositionally, it is heavily voice-overed footage of the first months of the liquidation efforts (cleaning the area of radioactive debris, sealing problematic areas with concrete, etc.), interviews with experts, doctors, local residents, and politicians.[23] The film also covers the evacuation of the Exclusion Zone, the resettlement of the people, and panoramas of the newly constructed sarcophagus over the destroyed reactor. The *Chronicle*... closure is a didactic warning to the world community and future generations:

"THE FIRST PUBLIC SCREENING OF THE FILM TOOK PLACE AT THE KYIV HOUSE OF CINEMA ONLY FIVE MONTHS LATER, ON FEBRUARY 14, 1987."

> **Let us remember, in sorrow and joy, that the atom has two faces. [...] its other face, similar to the one whose sinister mushroom has for decades been hanging over the consciousness of the present-day mankind, over its perception of the world.**

REVIEWS OF THE FILM, while highlighting the heroism and dedication of the production team, consistently return to one of its central leitmotifs, cementing the *Chronicle's* reception in antiwar and non-proliferation terms. In this fog of peace, critics positioned the film as both a historical lesson about the technological disaster and a global call for disarmament:

> **This is a cautionary film, a warning bell—no one and nothing will survive a global nuclear catastrophe, which we can and must prevent today.**[24]

When *Chronicle*... was screened in Moscow in October 1987 as part of a Ukrainian film festival during the Days of Ukraine at VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy), it was indeed promoted as "a film about the struggle for peace, a work addressing internationalism and the friendship of peoples".[25] Still, the film's most striking antiwar framing was again evident in the Russian capital, at the XV Moscow International Film Festival in July 1987. Opened by Gorbachev himself, the event was designed to showcase the successes of democratic reforms in both the country and its film industry. It was also one of the first occasions where *Chronicle*... was presented to the international film community as a truly global phenomenon, a movie about the universal tragedy of a planetary scale. What is remarkable is that this universal agenda, inspired by the film, was shared by the film's authors, Soviet industry bureaucrats, and foreign guests alike. If *Chronicle*... cinematographer Volodymyr Taranchenko claims the topic covered in the film is relevant

worldwide and "very important for the future existence of humanity", then the new Head of the USSR State Film Agency Aleksandr Kamshalov sharpens the message into geopolitical terms, stating that:

> **[…] the harsh lessons of Chornobyl advocated for a nuclear-free world […] for the humanism of cinema, for peace and friendship between peoples!** [26]

But it is the acclaimed American film director Stanley Kramer who took the film to the highest level of universalist peace pedagogy. Inspired by *Chronicle…*, he decided to make his next film about Chornobyl and wanted this production:

Rozpad (1990), directed by Mykhailo Belikov, was the first Soviet fiction film about Chornobyl.

> **[…] to be not Soviet, not American, not Soviet-American, but global. I want every viewer to understand that the tragedy of Chornobyl can happen anywhere, to anyone, and at any time".**[27]

IT IS WORTH NOTING, however, that the film's reception was marked from the outset by a certain ambivalence, one that partly mirrored the dramaturgical structure and rhetorical modality of the film itself. This paradoxical convergence may be summarized by the canonical Soviet Cold War formula of the "struggle for peace," in which a pacifist teleology is articulated in explicitly militaristic terms. If we look beyond the neutral documentation mission, Shevchenko's movie is a classic example of what Bill Nichols calls the expository mode of documentary filmmaking.[28] The expository mode of non-fiction representation is the most conservative and authoritarian way of organizing a film argument, which employs didactic narration, direct address, voice-over, and non-synchronized sound. It aims to present an epistemic truth, to persuade the viewer rather than challenge the status quo. The expository mode aims to present a clear and ideologically coherent narrative to the viewer, with the filmmaker serving as a neutral mediator. From this perspective, *Chronicle…* can be read as a conventional Soviet propaganda film that normalizes catastrophe through an emphasis on administrative competence and heroic sacrifice in the struggle against radiation. What made the film globally resonant, however, was its appeal to the universal grammar of war and the affective structures of empathy it mobilizes.

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In the first three years after the accident, the optimistic official narrative was structured around "liquidation": the normalization of the Chornobyl accident and the success of cleanup activities.[29] What scholars would later identify as the state media strategy (focus on the heroic deeds of the emergency workers, the familial solidarity of the Soviet people, and the efficiency of the central and local authorities)[30] was early and clearly manifested in *Chronicle…*:

> **[…] the Chornobyl accident highlighted the wonderful qualities of Soviet people: responsibility, decency, courage, selflessness, nobility, generosity.**[31]

WHILE NOT DENYING the selflessness of many cleanup workers, related sometimes to lack of knowledge as well as to the notion of public duty, it is worth noting a curious semantic slip. The official use of the term "liquidation" (*likvidatsiia*) encoded Soviet post-accident governance within a militarized semantic field, aligning the Chornobyl disaster with the warfare rhetoric. In the absence of an officially designated perpetrator – and under conditions in which blaming the Party was impermissible–the catastrophe was narrativized as a people's war against an unprecedented enemy: radiation itself.[32] The rhetoric proved so tenacious that it outlived the Soviet Union itself, continuing to reverberate decades later in the imaginaries of European intellectuals for whom liquidators are "soldiers of celestial fire".[33]

Historical irony once again twisted the wish of the pioneer of the Soviet atomic bomb project, Igor Kurchatov, who is believed to have coined the formula of the peaceful atom being a worker, not a soldier. Hence, *Chronicle…* is saturated with warfare references throughout: "a deadly enemy[…] invisible, carried out its dark deed in the body of man. Radiation, it has no odor, no color, only a voice".[34] In Shevchenko's film, the "deadly enemy" gained

a voice of the Geiger Counter, which afterward became the main feature of post-accident film soundscapes.

A simple question remains, however, why does the film envision Chornobyl as a war zone, a battlefield. Such reasoning might be expected from a documentary like *The Chornobyl Operational Zone* (1987), commissioned by the USSR Ministry of Defense – but not from a newsreel and documentary film studio production. *Chronicle…* aesthetic choices are hardly self-evident and, in fact, were largely essentialized *a posteriori*, given that warfare rhetoric gradually vanishes from Chornobyl cinema after 1988. Already in *Rozpad* (1990), this military-patriotic pathos is openly mocked, particularly as manifested in one of the canonical episodes of Chornobyl iconography – the hoisting of the red flag over the fourth reactor, an image that inadvertently resembles the raising of the Soviet banner over the Reichstag. This episode is absent from Shevchenko's film but appears in *Chornobyl: Two Colors of Time* (1986–1988).

"At the alarm, our army took its stand on the defensive line of misfortune. They went as if beyond the front line – but without ammunition, carrying only dry rations," the narrator of *Chronicle…* comments over a montage of military vehicles and people boarding APCs. It is true that more than half of the cleanup workers were military personnel.[35] It is also true that the extensive use of military equipment (as well as its abundance in the film) offered protection against alpha and beta radiation, radioactive dust and contamination, but not against gamma radiation. Yet the expansion of war references went beyond this immediate logic. Numerous witnesses compared Chornobyl to World War II because the memory of the war remained vivid, especially in the devastated regions of Ukraine and Belarus, and was continually reinforced through established practices of commemoration.[36] The 1985 40th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War was a particularly largescale example: it featured a major parade on Red Square in Moscow – the first such parade since 1965 and the last of comparable scale in Soviet history – alongside films such as *Battle of Moscow* (1985, dir. Yuri Ozerov) and *Come and See* (1985, dir. Elem Klimov), as well as exhibitions, television programs, and commemorative medals. Operating within the established framework of war-oriented commemorative practices and cinematic tradition, the *Chronicle…* team undoubtedly drew on their extensive experience in the war-film genre to shape the narrative and iconography of their production.

AT THE SAME TIME, comparing Chornobyl to a war not only highlighted Soviet "cult of war",[37] but constituted the accident as a universal traumatic experience, manifesting the historical rupture of "before" and "after." As one of the witnesses in Shcherbak's documentary novel describes it: "It was reminiscent of the war. Every one of us in the Town Committee has kept until now this sense of a boundary: before the war and after the war. We simply say: that was before the war."[38]

It is no surprise that the heroism of liquidators, as well as filmmakers, became a modernized version of the feats of the Soviet army during the Great Patriotic War, while the experience of horizontal mobilization and solidarity was appropriated by the official Soviet heroic narrative. A 1987 article in Ukrainian press emphasized this solidarity in the following terms: "In those fraught days, the artists – chroniclers, historians, fighters all at once – set aside every other task and bent themselves to a single aim: to give their compatriots the unvarnished word of truth."[39] Eventually, *Chronicle…* was described as the most tragic postwar cinematic chronicle, and its creators were proclaimed "worthy heirs to their predecessors, the frontline cameramen who filmed in the fire of the Great Patriotic War".[40] After the preview of *Chronicle…* filmmaker, film actress, and social activist Dzhemma Firsova raised a question of whether the documentary *Defeat of the Nazi Army Near Moscow* (1942) would have been as effective if it were shown six months after the events depicted.[41] The film's aesthetic and moral urgency clearly derived from wartime experiences and iconographies. Not coincidentally, *Chronicle* was awarded the Oleksandr Dovzhenko Golden Medal, an All-Union Goskino prize for the best military-patriotic film (1987).[42]

"THE HEROISM OF LIQUIDATORS, AS WELL AS FILMMAKERS, BECAME A MODERNIZED VERSION OF THE FEATS OF THE SOVIET ARMY DURING THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR."

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And yet, contrary to the sense of traumatic rupture often identified as the main trigger for the unprecedented militarization of Chornobyl's representation in *Chronicle…* and in the immediate post-1986 culture more broadly, such rhetorical framing had a longer genealogy and must be considered within an earlier cinematic tradition. A significant corpus of Ukrainian films produced between 1974 and 1986, depicting the construction of the Chornobyl NPP and the city of Prypiat, pioneered the iconography of nuclear modernity before the disaster – one that was later overshadowed by the technological skepticism and dystopian consensus of the post-1986 era.[43] Although these pre-accident Ukrainian films were made in a utopian mode of technopolitical optimism and progress, avoiding the explicit military imagery characteristic of *Chronicle…*, they nevertheless still echoed the experience and memory of war.

One of the first Chornobyl films, *Chornobyl NPP*–produced twelve years before *Chronicle…* but written by the same Ihor Malyshevskyi – already establishes a pattern of avoiding any association between nuclear technology and its military applications, containing only one explicit reference to the atom in a wartime context, voiced by a schoolchild: "In the past, Russian spies and partisans used the atom to blow up trains," which the

Film stills from *Chornobyl: Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*, Volodymyr Shevchenko, 1986.

film frames ironically as a naïve, historically displaced remark. In pre-1986 movies the memory of the war is typically invoked in two, non-technological, ways: first, through direct references to the wartime history of the region, and second, through the biographies and army-related experiences of the construction workers building the ChNPP and the town of Prypiat. In this context, the "peaceful atom" is imagined rather as a therapeutic force, intended to bring generations together, heal wartime traumas, and repair infrastructures damaged by the war.

THIS NARRATIVE STRATEGY is fully articulated in *Morning of Atomohrad*.[44] Produced in the same year as *Chornobyl NPP*, but by a different studio – *Ukrtelefilm* (the Ukrainian Studio of Television Films), which enjoyed a far wider reach due to its television distribution – *Morning of Atomohrad* largely defined the pre-accident iconography of Chornobyl in Ukrainian cinema. The film was originally envisioned to open, somewhat surprisingly, with wartime newsreel footage of the Prypiat River being crossed by soldiers of the 1st Partisan Army of General Kovpak, situating the regional history within a larger historical narrative: "[…] while on the banks of the quiet Prypiat River […] the Soviet Army was advancing, liberating Ukraine." This scene was ultimately left out, but it was replaced with an equally evocative moment. Near a World War II monument, Komsomol members – who are also construction workers of the Chornobyl NPP and the town Prypiat – take an oath, in the name of the sun and the Motherland, to always remember the military valor of their fathers and the names of all those to whom they owe their lives and happiness. Veterans attend the ceremony, casually asking about the ongoing construction of the nuclear plant. Through this random and informal exchange, the generational gap is bridged, linking the partisans of the Great Patriotic War with the Komsomol builders who are going to shape the Soviet nuclear future.

From there, the film unfolds as an almanac of worker biographies, many of whom served in the army or were affected by the war. Among the former are two brothers, Ivan and Mykhailo, former tank drivers, who connect soldierly skills to those needed for construction:

> **Now, all these qualities are helping us in our work on constructing the nuclear power plant.**

Among the latter is Maria Serdiuk, a house painter. Orphaned in childhood, she was raised in Makarenko's labor colony, took part in the collectivization campaign, and survived Auschwitz. Maria not only appears in the film; she is also the subject of the poem "Maria from Ukraine – No. 62276: From Auschwitz to the Chornobyl Nuclear Plant",[45] part of the cycle "Breath of the Atom" (which also includes a poem about Ivan and Mykhailo, *The Welders Are Kings)*, by the renowned Ukrainian poet Ivan Drach. In *Morning of Atomohrad*, Maria is featured in a deliberately staged scene as a survivor, her presence is a symbol of endurance. Her voice addresses the young female workers, casting the horrors of war in the light of the peaceful atom:

> **And what we are building here, the first stream of our atom, let it serve peaceful purposes, bringing us happiness and beauty, so that we never again know about such horrible things as war, explosions, and worries.**

SADLY, THAT HOPE never materialized. In 2022, the Russian army launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Prypiat area once again became a site of military offence. Entering from Belarus, Russian forces seized the Chornobyl NPP (later also capturing the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which they still control). Nuclear energy returned to its military origins: for the first time in history, a nuclear power plant was occupied by an invading army and essentially weaponized. The Russian invasion, unlike the explosion of the fourth reactor in 1986, was recorded by an anonymous Ukrainian resident and by the station's surveillance cameras. Using

smartphone footage, panoramic views of the plant, testimonies from Ukrainian personnel who survived the occupation, and the station's own surveillance recordings, Oleksiy Radynskyi created *Chornobyl 22* (2023) and *Special Operation* (2025), contributing to a broader Chornobyl filmography and documenting the most recent iteration of the linkage between the nuclear power plant and military action – between atom and soldier. "We called the accident a war," recalls one of the Ukrainian survivors of the occupation, "before the war, that meant before the accident." Therefore, preventing any recurrence of the 1986 catastrophe became one of the principal objectives of the Ukrainian personnel during Chornobyl site occupation. Using all their technical and professional expertise, they resisted, manipulated, and pressured the Russian soldiers. A tactical victory was achieved, as Russian army withdrew from the exclusion zone in the end of March of 2022. But the war continues.

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3 K. A. Gladkov, *Energiia atoma* [Energy of the atom] (Moscow: Detskaia Literatura, 1968), 167.

4 Yu. I. Koryakin, *Biography of the Atom: Stories on the Discovery and Use of Atomic Energy* (Moscow: Gosatomizdat, 1961), 3.

5 Eventually, marking the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet peaceful atom, Mosfilm released two ideologically charged films: *Take Aim* [Vybor tseli, 1974/76] and *Moscow, My Love* [Moskva, liubov moia, 1974]. In both films, Hiroshima functions as a traumatic core and a kind of MacGuffin, but they develop the theme in different genre directions. While *Take Aim* remains a historical epic focused on the Soviet nuclear project, Moscow, *My Love* ventures to fuse this traumatic memory with the celebration of Russian high culture, ballet in particular.

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7 See: A.Rubina, "May the Atom Be a Worker, Not a Soldier!" *Ogonyok* vol. 41 (October 9, 1960): 28–29; A. Chernyshev, "The Atom's Workplace." *Izvestia*, no. 69 (22 March 1963): 4; *Atom at a New Workplace* (1965; Mosnauchfilm, dir. Boris Epstein).

8 Practically in parallel, Ukrainian studios commissioned *Chornobyl: Two Colors of Time* (1986–1988, dir. Ihor Kobryn), *Pain and Courage of Chornobyl* (1986, dir. Israel Goldstein), and *Chornobyl: Breaking Bread* (1986, dir. Oleksandr Kosinov), while the central Russian studios produced *The Bell of Chernobyl* (1986, dir. Rollan Serhiienko) and *Warning* (1987, dir. Vladimir Osminin and Elena Pozdnyak).

9 Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive, 2005), 12, 19.

10 Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*, 124.

11 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3. One can also find a quite opposite approach, which treats Chornobyl as a household name for spectacular disaster, overshadowing other cases of nuclear slow violence, such as Hanford and Maiak; see Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Iurii Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 6.

13 Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, 3.

14 The initial title options were *The Address of Our Misfortune* and *Chornobyl: Twenty Difficult Weeks*. The first was rejected for its perceived overemphasis on victimhood, evident in successive script versions in which references to assistance and suffering were systematically removed. The second became progressively less relevant as delays in securing approval postponed the film's release.

15 Ihor Malyshevskyi, *Volodymyr Shevchenko. From Kulunda to Chornobyl* (Kyiv, Mystetstvo, 1988), 12.

16 The title was deliberately left untranslated for international distribution, preserving a sense of unfamiliarity. It also appears in transliteration from Russian as Raspad. The word carries multiple layers of meaning that are lost in translation: radioactive decay, the breakdown of the social fabric, and the disintegration of the USSR.

17 Among the latest films of the creative duo were the wartime trilogy *Soviet Ukraine. Years of Struggle and Victory* (1974–1977); the wartime documentary *Battle for Kyiv* (1973); and the WWII feature film *Counterstrike* (1985). Moreover, both Volodymyr Taranchenko and Viktor Kripchenko, cameramen on *Chronicle...*, brought experience from WWII-related projects: Taranchenko as an assistant to the war cameraman Valentyn Orliankin, and Kripchenko through his work on the abovementioned *Soviet Ukraine: Years of Struggle and Victory* (1974–1977). In Malyshevskyi's memoirs of Shevchenko, one recurring theme is not only Volodymyr's childhood experience of war and occupation, but also his extraordinary knowledge of the historical and technical details of WWII. Malyshevskyi, *Volodymyr Shevchenko*, 13.

18 Although Shevchenko's external radiation dose exceeded the permissible limit, reaching 126.3% of the level established by the temporary sanitary safety regulations for Chornobyl-related work, the press reported cautiously, avoiding mention of his diagnosis and instead focusing on his personal courage and the fulfillment of his civic and professional duties, as well as his obligations as a Communist and an artist. Bronchitis appears in Shevchenko's own diary, though Malyshevskyi interprets it merely as a "reassuring" diagnosis. In subsequent literature, however, the canonical diagnosis becomes lung cancer. See: Anatolii Karas, "Diktatura (khuodno-dokumentalna povist')", *Viche*, no. 10 (2006).

19 Malyshevskyi, Volodymyr Shevchenko, 139–14.

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23 *Chronicle...* was narrated by the film actor Nikolay Olyalin, renowned for his role in Yuri Ozerov's WWII epic *Liberation* (1971–1972).

24 *Chornobyl: Khronika tiazhkykh tyzhniv* [*Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*]. *Vechernii Kyiv*, no. 92, April 20, 1987.

25 "From October We Come." *Pravda Ukrainy*, no. 247 (October 25, 1987): 3.

26 V. Borshchov and I. Dumkin, "Chornobyl: Khronika tiazhkykh tyzhniv", *Na ekranakh Ukrainy*, no. 28, July 11, 1987.

27 Ibid.

28 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33–38; Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 84–86.

29 Kyiv Studio of Popular Science Films, among others, produced four "optimistic" pictures aimed to restore devalued legitimacy of the Soviet scientific project, to normalize the accident and define it as a series of acceptable errors: *Radiational Shield of Kyiv* (1986, dir. Yurii Tyshchenko); *Nuclear Station Engineer* (1987, dir. Mykhailo Tkachuk); *Special Processing Site* (1987, dir. V. Kravchuk); *Radiation. The Defensive Line* (1987, dir. Ihor Ponomairov).

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32 The verdict in the Chornobyl trial was announced on July 29, 1987.

33 "Radioactive Fire: Why the Chernobyl Experience Calls Our Worldview into Question", *Lettre International*, vol. 60 no. 1, (2003): 11–15.

34 *Chronicle of the Hard Weeks.*

35 See: Svetlana Bodrunova, "Chernobyl in the Eyes: Mythology as a Basis of Individual Memories and Social Imaginaries of a 'Chernobyl Child'", *Anthropology of East Europe Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 22; *Chornobyl: Breaking Bread* (1986, Ukrkinokhronika, dir. Oleksandr Kosinov).

36 Andreas Zink, "Approaching the Void – Chernobyl in Text and Image." *Anthropology of East Europe Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (2012): 100–112. The war devastated Ukraine, destroying 15% of its territory and claiming the lives of an equivalent share of its population. Approximately 700 cities and towns lie in ruins, and more than 80% of its industrial and agricultural capacity has been wiped out. See Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 291–292.

37 Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War* (1994).

38 In Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, 1. Yaroshynska even sees the Chornobyl accident as a fundamental divide in global human history: "And it, life on Earth, will henceforth be divided not only into eras, eras, cultures, religions, socio-political formations, it will be divided into life before and after Chornobyl. The Earth will never again be what it was before April 26, 1986, 1 hour and 24 minutes […]". Alla Yaroshynska, "Chernobyl sovershenno sekretno" [Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter], *Media-Inform* (1992): 8.

39 E. Pozdnyakova, "Postupok" [A Courageous Act], *Pravda Ukrainy*, no. 77 (1987): 3.

40 I. Pazhitnova, "Pry vykonanni profesiinoho oboviazku…"[In the performance of professional duty…], *Na ekranakh Ukrainy* [On the screens of Ukraine], no. 21 (1987).

41 E. Pozdnyakova, "Postupok", 3. Dzhemma Firsova was a filmmaker, film actress, and social activist. After the Chornobyl accident, she participated in the creation of the Chornobyl Union organization as well as was appointed a head of an independent expert group on the immediate causes of the Chornobyl accident.

42 In 1972, the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy, Goskino USSR, and the Union of Cinematographers of the USSR instituted the Oleksandr Dovzhenko Golden Medal, accompanied by three silver medals, to recognize exceptional filmmakers in the field of military-patriotic cinema. The awards are presented annually on the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy, with the laureates receiving them on Victory Day. Yuliya Solntseva became the first recipient. See: "Medali imeni A. P. Dovzhenko" [Medals named after A. P. Dovzhenko], *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5 (1972): 55.

43 The most representative films are: *Chornobyl NPP* (dir. Leonid Avtonomov, Ukrkinokhronika, 1974); *Morning of Atomohrad* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1974); *Light Up Your Sun* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1976); *Chain Reaction* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1978); and *Belonging* (dir. Borys Kvashniov, Ukrtelefilm, 1982).

44 Atomohrad – a Soviet neologism combining "atom" and the Old Slavic hrad, a solemn term for "town" – "Atomic Town".

45 Ivan Drach, *Korin' i krona* [Root and Crown], (Kyiv: Radyans'kyi pysmennyk, 1974), 28–33.