Streaming media and the dynamics of remembering and forgetting: The Chernobyl case

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to elucidate the mnemonic conditions established in the ever-increasing production and use of cultural memory in streaming media environments. To gain in-depth insight into how memories are selected for remembering and sorted for forgetting, the focus is the HBO Chernobyl mini-series. The case study of HBO’s Chernobyl is selected to qualitatively explore cultural memories across the series throughout the complexities of globally connected technologies and markets, where different cultures and languages, as well as media framings, come into play. Theoretically, the article is based on conceptualization of cultural memory studies and streaming media platforms. Methodologically, the case study is supported by the multidimensional analytical lens developed by Erll, adopted to elucidate how the cultural memory of Chernobyl is activated, mediated, and shaped by the streaming series. These three dimensions involve the intra-medial aspects of how memory is expressed within the representation itself, the inter-medial relations which designate the interplay with previous representations of the same historical event, and the pluri-medial contexts in which novels and films appear and exert their influence on cultural memory. In the three-dimension analysis, we address the construction and circulation of cultural memory from the production to the reception of the mini-series in multiple media environments and across borders, depicting the social, cultural, and political impact of streaming media productions.

Keywords
Chernobyl, cultural memory, HBO, history, literature, streaming media, transmediality

Introduction
The digital shift in media production and consumption has had a palpable impact on mediating practices of memories of the past and consequently, on understanding the present world. The accumulating power of streaming media to spread stories from the past, present, and the future worldwide forms the overall rationale for this study (Lobato, 2019). The streamed capacity of digital mediation of knowledge and culture has been underscored during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when audiences have connected to streaming media services more than ever before (Bacon, 2020).
This momentum has proved that the resources of streaming media often offer better accessibility compared to traditional television, archives, and libraries, for instance.

The aim of this case study is to elucidate the mnemonic conditions established in the ever-increasing production and use of cultural memory in streaming media environments. To gain in-depth insight into how memories are selected for remembering and sorted for forgetting by audiences worldwide, the focus is the HBO *Chernobyl* mini-series. This case study emerges as a prime example of how a successful series (Clark, 2019; Statista, 2019) involves dimensions of storytelling that cut through the global technology and media landscape, encompasses literary and cinematographic effects through surrounding geopolitical *epitextes* (Genette, 1987), thus triggering over-the-top (OTT) outreach (Clark, 2019) and shaping cultural memory (Gessen, 2019; Sous, 2019), as our research findings demonstrate. Combining theoretical frameworks from media studies, history, and literature, the article contributes to memory studies by addressing an updated empirical object such as the HBO mini-series, which is inextricably intertwined with cultural memory in a post-television era.

The case of HBO’s *Chernobyl* is selected to qualitatively explore the dynamics of certain cultural memories across the complexities of globally connected technologies and markets, where (different) cultures and languages, as well as media framings, come into play. Although streaming media reception studies commonly adopt quantitative approaches (see Castro et al., 2021; Rustad and Larsson, 2021; Schrøder, 2019), the intricate webs of media, discourses, and esthetics that intersect in the mediating processes of *Chernobyl* call for a pluridisciplinary and qualitative research approach, which includes media studies, history, and literature. Methodologically, the article is built as a case study (Yin, 2018) supported by the multidimensional analytical lens developed by Erll (2010), adopted to elucidate how the cultural memory of Chernobyl is activated, mediated, and shaped by the streaming series.

**Cultural memory in a (post-)television age**

Cultural memory studies have expanded to explore popular and commercial culture far from the expressions of early civilizations that were the focus during the early days of the field. This expansion is due to the broader use of cultural memory as an umbrella concept for the interplay between the past and the present in sociocultural contexts (Erll, 2011: 101). Furthermore, the consolidation of interconnected approaches between new media and collective memory (Neiger et al., 2011), transnational memory (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014), memory ecologies (Hoskins, 2004), and transcultural memory (Radstone, 2011), among others, points to a change when the technological performance of memory is no longer negligible. The exploration of how the past is shaped in dialog with complex algorithmic solutions for curating content and pushing viewers toward specific consumption patterns requires paying attention to underlying technology. Behind the interface of streaming platforms such as HBO (Nordic, Go, Max) and Netflix hides complex digital infrastructures that must fulfill a certain *reliability*, as too many breakdowns, in the form of “dropouts, slow loads, freezing, pixilation, and missing subtitles” (Lobato, 2019: 76) spoil the user experience. The sophistication is identifiable in the *co-determination* between the system and the user’s equipment, where an adjustment is put in place so that the experience is as optimal as possible for the technology available at the end-user. The effect is achieved through a *layered* organization, allowing for sub-infrastructures to connect and cooperate for global diffusion. However, this cannot be achieved without consistent *standardization*, consensus difficult to attain in a competitive market with multiple standards and formats (Lobato, 2019).

The current technological conditions for memory mediation demand an updated view on cultural memory. Departing from Assmann’s (2010) considerations on people’s active and passive
remembering and forgetting, and in contrast to traditional unilateral memory mediation, Hagedoorn (2013) contributes with a dynamic and interactive perspective on cultural memory. Hagedoorn’s focus on the active role of digital television viewers in the distribution of content, whether intentional or not, highlights how the selecting and sorting processes of digitally stored archives are pushed by users, as well as by technology, to be carried out at an increasingly faster pace. Moreover, interfaces and functionalities in continuous elaboration facilitate circulation of old material on the web, thus, (re)mediation of representations of the past. Therefore, improved circulation and accessibility are linked with vulnerability, through exposure to commercial reconsiderations, copyright issues, and other variables. The non-transparent selecting and sorting processes provide evidence of a more complex agency regarding the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, compared to how state institutions and traditional archives maintain links to the past. In this context, the power to shape the past is shared by several actors, but it is also usurped by commercial interests and technology advancements.

Digital television as a practice of cultural memory is useful for examining streaming media platforms such as HBO and Netflix as they share common features. Successful streaming media productions are associated with strong audience engagement, including so-called transmedia activism (Gambarato et al., 2020) and “dark tourism” to places associated with death and tragedy in historical fiction (McDowall, 2019). The productions are also often accompanied by podcasts and documentaries, as in the case of the fourth season of Netflix’s The Crown (2016), which is featured with three documentaries on the British royal family. Recent studies (Hardwick and Lister, 2019; Stahl, 2020) dedicated to the portrayal of history on television focus on series such as Vikings (History Channel 2013), which is accompanied by a sequel series (being developed by Netflix) and a comic book. Such practices deepen ties with the past among users and illustrate contemporary dynamics of memory circulation and the shaping of cultural memory. Instead of leading to a collapse of memory, as has been suggested regarding the increasing impact of television since the 1990s (Hoskins, 2004), retrospection and nostalgia are, on the contrary, important assets of streaming media (Pallister, 2019).

The case study of HBO’s Chernobyl mini-series is supported by Erll’s (2010) three-dimension model for observing cultural memory by looking within, between, and around cultural representations. These three dimensions involve the intra-medial aspects of how memory is expressed within the representation itself, the inter-medial relations which designate the interplay with previous representations of the same historical event, and the pluri-medial contexts in which “memory-making novels and films appear and exert their influence” (Erll, 2010: 390). A powerful representation of cultural memory optimizes these levels to circulate and make an impact. The three-dimension analysis includes (1) the inter-medial dimension of Chernobyl in terms of the transmedia effect involving Alexievich’s (2006) novel Voices from Chernobyl as well as The Chernobyl Podcast, (2) the intra-medial dynamics focused on the role of the hero in the series and the relationship between truth and lies in the representation of the nuclear accident, and (3) the pluri-medial level of how the series becomes part of a wider construction of cultural memory via political uses across networks in the public debate.

The inter-medial dimension: From the book Voices from Chernobyl to the HBO’s Chernobyl mini-series

Telling stories through multiple media environments is not a new phenomenon (Freeman, 2017), and there is diverse terminology to refer to it, such as crossmediality and transmediality. Within the transmediality realm, the focus is the inter-medial dimension directed at transmedia phenomena characterized by the “transmedia effect”: clusters of texts that merge with “the deliberate
multiplatform distribution of content” (Gambarato et al., 2020: 67). The transmedia effect alludes to the expansion of compelling stories across various media formats and platforms, forming a cohesive storyworld. At its core, transmedia storytelling is characterized by the involvement of multiple media platforms, content expansion, and audience engagement (Gambarato et al., 2020). This generative dimension of mediations created across various connected media platforms is at the center of the notion of transmedia effect, which has become a recurrent pattern observed in recent years (Gambarato et al., 2020). Thus, the HBO Chernobyl mini-series is not an isolated case representing the transmedia effect, as similar characteristics can be observed in the production of recent series—such as The Handmaid’s Tale (Hulu 2017), The Sinner (USA Network 2017), and Big Little Lies (HBO 2017). These stories started from books and expanded their scope beyond the adaptation and dramatization of the original text. The Chernobyl series portrays the historical events—with artistic license—of one of the worst nuclear accidents, which occurred on April 26, 1986, at reactor number four of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, near the city of Pripyat in northern Soviet Ukraine.

It is important to establish key elements before diving into the three-dimension analysis of Chernobyl: (1) The HBO mini-series is not a documentary series but a historical drama series. (2) There are numerous films (Aurora 2006; Innocent Saturday 2011; Inseparable 2013; etc.), documentaries (Chernobyl Heart 2003; Inside Chernobyl 2012; The Voice of Ljudmila 2001; etc.), and books about the Chernobyl disaster (Chernobyl 01:23:40, 2016; Chernobyl 2018; Midnight in Chernobyl 2019; etc.) but they are not directly connected to the HBO series, and therefore, they are not part of this analysis. (3) The media platforms directly involved in the HBO series, and therefore, considered in the analysis, are the book Voices from Chernobyl by Nobel laureate Belarusian author Alexievich (2006), originally published in Russian, in 1997, and The Chernobyl Podcast (Sagal, 2019), a podcast produced by HBO and launched concomitantly with the series. The Chernobyl series was produced by HBO and Sky and distributed by HBO International on cable television and streaming services, such as HBO Nordic, HBO Go, and HBO Max. The Chernobyl Podcast is accessible via the HBO Go and HBO Now mobile applications, as well as YouTube, Spotify, and SoundCloud, among other digital platforms.

Voices from Chernobyl (Alexievich, 2006) is a remarkable exercise of oral history—an example of witness literature—representing personal memories of Chernobyl survivors who shed light on the accident. Although the book was originally published more than 10 years after the disaster, it was the first to really fill the information gap and the narrative vacuum left by the Soviet media’s dismissal of Chernobyl accounts (Gessen, 2019). Gessen (2019) acknowledges the importance of new historically sound publications on the topic, such as Plokhy (2018) and Higginbotham (2019) but emphasizes that despite the fictionalized version of the series, it is likely the HBO show which will remain in the collective memory: “It being television, and very well-received television, it is the series, rather than the books, that will probably finally fill the vacuum where the story of Chernobyl should be. This is not a good thing” (Gessen, 2019). Gessen’s argument is supported by the network and salience effects involved in the circulation of cultural memory across streaming media services (Gilchrist and Sands, 2016). “The fundamental premise of platform-mediated networks is that users place a higher value on platforms with a larger number of other users” (McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2017: 141). Therefore, streaming media create a network effect (Cennamo and Santalo, 2013), meaning that the value added by users of streaming media services increases according to the number of other people using the service because users have more possibilities with whom to interact (McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2017). In the context of streaming media services, this interaction is visible by the top 10 lists, likes, and recommendations, for instance. Moreover, streaming services create a salience effect (Kioulos, 2004), which is related to attention, prominence, and valence (attractiveness) framing the communication process. Salience is then used by
streaming services to make certain elements more noticeable by the platform users. These elements are selected according to the companies interests, for example, to highlight their original productions, presenting them first or in a bigger format than other options. Thus, the network and salience effects consolidate streaming platforms’ position to shape content, favoring their own original productions to the detriment of other content, which determines what “will remain in or fade from public consciousness” (Gilchrist and Luca, 2017). Streaming service subscribers become tastemakers: When Chernobyl aired, “viewers have rated Chernobyl the highest scored television series in history, according to over a 100,000 votes on IMDB [Internet Movie Database]” (Tassi, 2019) and, in the United States, the viewership reached 1.19 million per episode (Statista, 2019).

Although the series does not pretend to be a documentary and clearly presents fictional elements, such as the character of Ulana Khomyuk (a composite character representing several Soviet scientists involved in the aftermath of the accident and the cleanup efforts), the show’s extremely meticulous design production of the material culture of the Soviet Union (Gessen, 2019; Sisson, 2019) increases the perception of reality and truth (Shackleford and Vinney, 2020), helping the series to become memorable and to be set at the forefront of what is remembered and what is forgotten by audiences. In this sense, HBO “becomes both a producer of nostalgia and an access point for nostalgic responses” (Pallister, 2019: 2) to the cultural memory of the accident itself and the sovietness of Chernobyl. Unsurprisingly, Craig Mazin, the series creator, states in the first episode of the podcast that “the sovietness of things is half of what is fascinating” (Sagal, 2019) about HBO Chernobyl. Nostalgia intertwines deeply personal and collective memories, providing “a powerful social connection that helps us understand ourselves, our times, and our cultures” (Pallister, 2019: 5).

Initially, Alexievich “rolled her eyes” (Sous, 2019) when the creators of the series approached her for permission to use material from her book. She assumed it would be just one more international production: “I told my agent, ‘Galya, they’re going to make another film. . . .’ I was far from convinced. The only thing that convinced me, maybe, was the fee” (Sous, 2019). Nevertheless, afterward she confessed:

It really impressed me. It is a very strong film [series]. There is something there in the aesthetics that touches the modern consciousness. There is a dose of fear. There is reasoning. There is beauty. (. . .) We are now witnessing a new phenomenon that Belarusians, who suffered greatly and thought they knew a lot about the tragedy, have completely changed their perception about Chernobyl and are interpreting this tragedy in a whole new way. (Sous, 2019)

The relationship between Alexievich’s book and the HBO five-part mini-series is close: The series relies on the memories of Pripyat locals, as recounted in the book (Meduza, 2019). The personalization of the tragic accident is evidenced by the eyewitness’ viewpoint and shared experience, contributing to the formation of cultural memory elements. “Only through interviews or the publication of letters do their [eyewitnesses] experiences become an element of cultural memory (‘externalization’). Conversely, the individual only gains access to socially shared knowledge and images of the past through communication and media reception (‘internalization’)” (Erll, 2011: 114). Mazin, describing the historical sources he used to write the series, states: “I drew historical fact and scientific information from many sources, but Ms. Alexievich’s Voices from Chernobyl was where I always turned to find beauty and sorrow” (Sous, 2019). For instance, Mazin mentions the stories of heroism and sacrifice in the aftermath of the accident, and the stories involving animals, such as the abandoned dogs (Sagal, 2019).

In the first podcast episode, Mazin refers to the series as a “dramatic telling of history” (Sagal, 2019), and in the second episode, he comments that the book did not just provide direct material for the series, such as in the case of the heartwarming story of Ljudmila and her firefighter husband
Vasily Ignatenko, but also inspiration, for instance, regarding the elaboration of the fictional character Khomyuk (Sagal, 2019). This is an illustration of the transmedia effect at play, as the series is not restricted to the adaptation of the book but adds new content to its storyworld.

The transmedia expansion of content also happened through *The Chernobyl Podcast*, a companion podcast for the series with new episodes (five and a bonus episode released in August 2019) published as each HBO episode aired once a week from May through June 2019. The podcast, hosted by Sagal (2019), features conversations with Mazin about where the show was as true as possible to historical events and where events were compressed, combined, or modified as part of artistic license, such as in the case of the trial of three power plant employees in the series’ last episode. Mazin, in the first podcast episode, poses that the cost of lies during the aftermath of the disaster was his main motivation for creating the show, and that the podcast was developed to be transparent about what is true and what is not in the HBO *Chernobyl* min-series (Sagal, 2019).

Interestingly, the scene in the series’ final episode when the scientist Valery Legasov testifies in court and says, “Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, that debt is paid. That is how a RBMK reactor core explodes. Lies” (Gessen, 2019), never happened, as Legasov did not even attend the trial (Mitchell, 2019; Sagal, 2019). Gessen (2019) argues that the series’ portrayal of “heroic scientists confronting intransigent bureaucrats by explicitly criticizing the Soviet system of decision-making” is inaccurate, because “resignation was the defining condition of Soviet life.” Gessen concludes that “resignation is a depressing and untelegenic spectacle,” and therefore, the series repeatedly presents the opposite. Moreover, Gessen (2019) highlights that the series does not depict the “vast divisions between different socioeconomic classes in the Soviet Union” and the “Soviet relationships of power.”

Predictably, the HBO mini-series caused a fuzz in Russia with media outlets and audiences reacting emphatically to *Chernobyl*. The show “has become something of a national sensation in Russia” (Shepelin, 2019), although it aired only online to paying viewers, and the Communist Party wanted the show banned (Sharf, 2019). However, the pro-Kremlin media “launched a mini-crusade against it” (Shepelin, 2019). In response to why the government media so vehemently opposed the mini-series, Shepelin (2019) argues that “it is an ordinary case of jealous resentment: ‘Only we have the right to talk about our history,’ they say, ‘so don’t butt in.’ However, the reception given ‘Chernobyl’ says more about the critics than it does about the series.” Moreover, the state-controlled television channel NTV announced the production of their own Chernobyl series based on the premise that a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spy infiltrated the power plant to sabotage it (Shepelin, 2019). In terms of the transmedia effect observed in the case of *Chernobyl*, this initiative of NTV to expand the content outside officially accepted boundaries, could be considered a noncanonical addition to the storyworld of *Chernobyl*. Alexievich commented on the topic with disappointment:

> In the beginning, Russian media was very positive about the series and then probably there was some yelling in the Kremlin and they suddenly became very patriotic. Then there was news they are launching their own series about Chernobyl, about how “our” agents pursue some American spy at the power plant. My God, when I read all this, I thought that 30 years have passed, and has really nothing changed in the consciousness? (Sous, 2019)

Russian journalist Shepelin (2019) adds that “the fact that an American, not a Russian, TV channel tells us about our own heroes is a source of shame that the pro-Kremlin media apparently cannot live down.”

In this subsection, we emphasized the inter-medial dimension of *Chernobyl* in terms of the interplay of the series with Alexievich’s (2006) novel *Voices from Chernobyl* and *The Chernobyl*
Podcast. Moreover, we explored the transmedia effect evoked by the series. We continue the analysis now looking within Chernobyl to discuss its intra-medial dimension.

The intra-medial dimension: The hero narrative in support of “true” memory

The intersection between documentary and fiction is central for the reach of the Chernobyl series, as it will determine the story’s (ir)regardabilité [(un)viewability] (Garçon, 2005) and its power to attract increasing viewership of entertaining fiction. Alexievich’s literary procedure mixes socianthropology and different internal points of focalizations to support readability (Genette, 1972). The moving images, in their turn, visually reproduce the specific historical event through production design, costume design, and mise en scène that underscore the documentary dimension. Thus, Chernobyl can be classified as a historical drama or docufiction (Candeloro, 2000; Garçon, 2005), relating a real historical event in recent times through fictional elements and dramaturgical techniques. The viewability and fictional dimension are also supported by other elements, such as the use of the hero.

The myth of the hero has proved its strength of attraction in contemporary popular fiction, for example, in 2001, A Space Odyssey (S. Kubrick and A. C. Clarke 1969), Avatar (J. Cameron 2009), and the Star Wars trilogy (G. Lucas 1977–1983). The authors behind these globally circulating stories have explicitly, and perhaps surprisingly, admitted their debt to Campbell’s (2004) The Hero with a Thousand Faces, originally published in 1949 (see Wahlberg, 2011). Even though Campbell’s work has been the subject of criticism, it clearly remains a reference in contemporary creative storytelling. Campbell’s analysis of the monomythical hero outlines the central elements and phases of the hero’s journey, concatenating myths from a range of cultures. With the aim to uncover how streaming media continue to make use of myth criticism, and how the literary element of the hero plays out the tension between truths and lies in the storytelling of the Chernobyl series, the following intra-dimension inquiry adopts Campbell’s scheme of how a protagonist becomes a hero. The analysis will discuss Campbell’s (2004) division of the hero’s journey into three distinct parts—(1) the departure, and the call for adventure, (2) the initiation, and a multitude of trials, and (3) the return, and the necessity to bring back a boon to the community—in relation to the function of the hero in the HBO series.

In Chernobyl, one character stands out as particularly important in the process of heroically saving the Soviet Union and the rest of the world from a worse climate catastrophe, namely, the engineer Valery Legasov. Legasov appears in the opening scenes of the first episode, 2 years after the accident, when he is about to commit suicide. Talking to a tape recorder, he asks:

> What is the cost of lies? It is not that we 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 does not matter who the heroes are. All we want to know is who is to blame. (1:23:45, 2019)

The statement that heroes no longer matter in this modern fiction genre is in line with representations of the hero as a complex figure between good and evil in contemporary society and storytelling (see Frisk, 2019). The hero is diluted and disappears in this context, in favor of the villains—those who are unfairly blamed and those who are the true source of evil. The quote offers an initial glimpse of Legasov’s own understanding of invisible heroes involved in the successive events and his own role as a disappointing hero in the drama. In the series, Legasov is literally called for adventure (Campbell, 2004: 45), as the deputy chairman of the council of ministers, Boris
Scherbina, orders Legasov by telephone to take on the role of an expert on RBMK (High-power Channel-type Reactor) reactors in the investigation of the Chernobyl disaster. The hero’s call includes confusion and anxiety. In this transformational phase, the hero searches for his (or her) new identity in the face of an inescapable destiny (Campbell, 2004: 45–54). Legasov reluctantly understands that he holds his compatriots’ and the world’s destiny in his hands. This phase demands acceptance of the mission, and by a gatekeeper, incarnated in the series by the government’s council of ministers.

In the second episode (Please Remain Calm, 2019), Legasov is called to provide a report during a meeting with the ministers and the president. Legasov seizes the occasion to tell the truth about the exploded reactor, but the attendees do not believe him. Thus, the president designates comrade Scherbina to visit the nuclear plant assisted by Legasov to report on the reactor’s status. The roles of these protagonists are muddled. Who is the hero, and who is the teacher, the guide, and the pathfinder who will lead the hero to the threshold toward initiation, which is the second phase of the hero’s journey? Who helps whom to cross the first threshold of strong and dark forces, in other words, the zone of Chernobyl (Campbell, 2004: 71–83)?

This crucial moment in the series points to the ambiguous role of the hero, who can either serve the Soviet Union and its reputation (Scherbina) or serve the truth (Legasov). The series focalization targets the fulfilling of Legasov’s hero journey, and consequently, that of the truth. Throughout the episodes, the Soviet Union and the truth are opposed and contradicted, showcasing the dynamics of remembering and forgetting in society. As Dyatlov, the villain engineer in charge of the nuclear facility the night of the accident, responds to assistant investigator Ulana Khomyuk: “You think the right questions will get you the truth? There is no truth. Ask the bosses whatever you want, and you will get the lie” (The Happiness of All Mankind, 2019). Khomyuk functions as the helper and assistant, who is important in the initiation phase to overcome the trials that confront the hero (Campbell, 2004: 89–100). In the third phase of the hero’s journey, she is also the one who pushes Legasov to embody the hero of the truth and not to turn into the villain, or a hero of the Soviet story. Khomyuk encourages Legasov to “return” (the third phase in Campbell’s scheme) to Vienna and the Atomic Energy Agency with the truth as a boon, explaining that:

There are 16 RBMK reactors running in the Soviet Union right now. We have to fix them. The only way to do that is to go public. (…) You have a chance to talk to the world, Valery. (…) Someone has to start telling the truth. (The Happiness of All Mankind, 2019)

The ambiguous hero, torn between those the series represents as the lying villains of the communist hierarchies and the true events, neither reveals the whole truth to the world nor lies. Toward the end, the Viennese press announces with an ounce of irony: “Finally a Soviet scientist who tells the truth” (Vichnaya Pamyat, 2019), and a Committee for State Security (KGB) agent assures the hero that he is not lying but doing “statecraft” (Vichnaya Pamyat, 2019). Legasov is awarded the title “hero of the Soviet Union” (Vichnaya Pamyat, 2019), which underscores how he compromises his own values and his state duty to achieve a change that will ensure nuclear safety for the future. He does not have the heroic strength to break with Soviet hegemonies, which leads to his suicide and the posthumous revelation in the tape recordings of his thoughts about what caused the accident (for transcripts of his tapes, see Pseudology, n.d.).

This lucid and tragic hero embodies the one who found a solution, although the outcome was a happy and a tragic ending. Thus, the Legasov hero is positioned as a “true, sacred, precious, exemplary, and significant” story, which can continue to live as a model “for human conduct,” offering “meaning and value to existence” (Eliade, 1966: 11–34, our translation). In this way, the hero myth infuses the series with esthetic strength, while affirming a world of complexity in which it seems
impossible to be either the hero of the truth or the lie. Legasov also personifies the author-producer’s moral message and a critique of the lies accompanying the cultural memory in question. Thus, the literary feature of the hero myth emerges as a major element in the shaping and interpretation of Chernobyl as an event stemming from lies and the withholding of information. This ideological way of remembering and forgetting the accident is further supported by the construction of a complex and value-tormented hero with whom it is possible to identify as a viewer.

This subsection amplified the intra-medial aspects of how memory is expressed within the series via the role played by its hero, Legasov, specially concerning the relationship between truth and lies in the representation of the nuclear accident. The analysis will now bring to the forefront the pluri-medial dimension as the political contextualization in which the HBO’s *Chernobyl* is inserted.

### The pluri-medial dimension: The politization of the memory of Chernobyl

Following Kansteiner (2002), among others, a recurring criticism of memory studies targets the tendency to study cultural representations of the past in isolation without taking the cultural and political contexts or audiences sufficiently into consideration. This is even more problematic in relation to streaming platforms that interact with the audience to a larger extent than traditional television. One way of addressing this shortcoming is to look closer at the pluri-medial networks in which the cultural representation circulates and exerts influence. As an expression of cultural memory, *Chernobyl* serves as a catalyst for discussion of important issues in contemporary culture, such as climate change, fake news, and state corruption which ultimately show different interpretations and uses of the mini-series. Although the memory of Chernobyl obviously has a stronger emotional and political charge in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (Lindbladh, 2019), in this section we discuss its entanglement with contemporary politics outside the former communist states with examples from daily press and social media in France, Sweden, and the United States. By analyzing *Chernobyl* as part of an ongoing negation between the past and the present, which is a central concern within cultural memory studies (Erll, 2011), we switch the focus from the narrative of the series itself to the reception of this cultural representation in the public debate.

The series received extensive and positive attention in Sweden, France, and the United States. The series was particularly debated in Swedish media, as the director of the series, Johan Renck, is Swedish, as are several of the actors. Sweden was also one of the countries affected by radioactive waste from the Chernobyl accident, although it caused relatively little harm. Moreover, it was a worker at the Swedish nuclear power plant Forsmark who first detected the alarmingly high levels of radiation and alerted Europe (Radio Sweden, 2011). After the second episode of the HBO *Chernobyl* series aired, the Swedish minister of social affairs placed the series in the political debate by stating on her Twitter account that “newly awakened proponents of nuclear power” should watch it (Strandhäll, 2019). The tweet from the Social Democratic minister should be seen in the context of the renewed political interest in nuclear power in Sweden and was followed by criticism of nuclear power in traditional media, using HBO’s cultural retelling of the accident as a reference or a starting point (Ericson, 2019; Kierkegaard, 2019; Liedman, 2019; Schottenius, 2019). Within this criticism, *Chernobyl* stood out as a valuable reconstruction of the past and in this respect, was used as a lesson to expose the danger of nuclear power, as well as the urgency for action on behalf of the climate. Because of this political instrumentalization, the historical dimension of the disaster was rarely considered extensively. HBO’s cultural representation of Chernobyl appeared as a political tool to draw attention to the naïveté of right-wing politicians who saw the
future in nuclear power plants. An editorial in the largest tabloid newspaper in Sweden stated, for instance, that Chernobyl should scare Sweden’s largest center-right conservative party “out of their minds” (Ericson, 2019), while historian Liedman (2019) dismissed support for nuclear power in present-day Sweden as misdirected nostalgia for the technological optimism of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, not all of those who used the memory of Chernobyl for political purposes to criticize nuclear power were positive about the representation produced and circulated by HBO. Although the disaster itself stood out as a significant cultural symbol of tragic blind faith in modernity during the 20th century, French philosopher Sandra Laugier argued in Libération that the series itself actually downplays the threat of nuclear technology by focusing on the dysfunctionality of the communist system: “Chernobyl presents the opaque character of the Soviet regime as the underlying cause of the disaster, repeatedly suggesting that in the better managed and designed power plants of the capitalist world, this would not happen” (Laugier, 2019, our translation). In a similar way, French philosopher and economist Frédéric Lordon (2019) pointed out in Le Monde Diplomatique resemblances between the capitalist system and socialism, regarding the quest for productivity, to explain the nuclear disaster. Journalist and anti-nuclear activist Baldassarra (2019) also criticized the series for not showing the influence of western countries and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when Soviet authorities downplayed the number of victims. This illustrates how the Chernobyl disaster as a cultural memory can be used not only to give legitimacy to a liberal and democratic political society on the western side of the Iron Curtain but also to challenge the same political system by associating this memory with general technological and political developments in Europe. Anti-nuclear proponents obviously also tend to universalize the lessons of Chernobyl by associating the memory of the disaster with industrial growth on both sides of the Iron Curtain, rather than the dysfunctionality of the Soviet Union.

The United States has historical experience of its own accident at Three Mile Island (in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) in 1979–1980. In terms of cultural memory, the American reception of the series illustrates how attitudes toward the recent past can be influenced by persistent cultural and political trends shaped over a long time. The Chernobyl accident in 1986 was largely placed within the ideological framework of the Cold War, following an established pattern of the historization of Soviet communism in the United States. The persistence of this cultural and political framework where the Soviet Union represents evil tyranny in opposition to the free world (United States) is underlined by the initiative of a “National Day of Victims of the Communism” in 2017, which follows this commemorative policy dating back to the Cold War (Koposov, 2018). In line with this tradition, a CNN review of HBO’s Chernobyl stated that the series “pulls back the Iron Curtain” while exposing “face-saving contortions by Kremlin” and the incompetence that allowed the disaster (Lowry, 2019). Chernobyl as a cultural symbol of the failure and corruption of the Soviet Union is even stronger within conservative circles in the United States, where the fear of communism is still a dominant trope and the memory of the Soviet Union an essential part of their political identity. In the conservative magazine National Review (Smith, 2019), the lesson of Chernobyl is the danger of a state that looks after its own interests, not its people. The relevant context of the series, therefore, is not energy or climate change but the fall of an ideological illusion:

Here are the last pages of the fantasy of socialism, a conclusion whose soundtrack was not brass bands victory at parades but the terrifying high-pitched static of the dosimeters wielded by terrified men in hazmat suits. Five years later, the Soviet Union would die. Chernobyl was the emetic manifestation of the illness that was Soviet socialism. (Smith, 2019)
Similar ideologic Cold War rhetoric occurred among conservatives and liberals outside the United States, where commentators emphasized the totalitarian and corrupted features of the Soviet Union as the determinant of the disaster and its negative consequences (Kärkkäinen, 2020; Magnusson, 2019). An editorial in the Swedish liberal-conservative daily Svenska Dagbladet pointed out that HBO should not “control the Swedish energy debate”: The nuclear power plant was stationed in a totalitarian state, and the death toll of nuclear accidents in general has actually been low, according to this perspective (Wålsten, 2019). Although Chernobyl obviously fits well into the Cold War polarization between totalitarianism and the free world, some commentators pointed out that hidden truths within Soviet bureaucracy are also present in contemporary society, with reference to how issues such as immigration have been dealt with in Sweden (Gür, 2019).

A nuclear explosion within a disintegrating political regime is obviously a powerful reference to underpin opposition and stir up emotional debates on contemporary issues. Such parallels between the past and the present are not without controversy. The American conservative writer Smith (2019) argued strongly against such claims by stating that the series could not be an indictment of Trumpism because the “epistemological difference between the Trump era and the Soviet era is so vast” (Smith, 2019).

This subsection explored the pluri-medial dimension of how the series became part of a wider construction of cultural memory in France, Sweden, and the United States. The examples of different reactions to Chernobyl emphasize the shifting significance and meaning of this cultural representation, and the importance of investigating it as part of an ongoing dialog between the past in different political and cultural communities. All comments, discussions, and controversies are important in turning the series into a memory-making fiction (Erll, 2010) and show the dynamic impact of streaming media as the series has influenced public debate far beyond the audience of the HBO platform. The political uses of the past in relation to Chernobyl, furthermore, illustrate how streaming media productions contribute to shaping cultural memory across national borders as similar reactions to the mini-series appeared in different national contexts, depending more on attitudes toward the Soviet Union and nuclear energy rather than national belonging.

“Protect me from what I want”: Streaming media and cultural memory

“Que le carnage commence!” [Let the carnage begin!] (Lauer, 2014). This is how the article published on Le Monde the day before Netflix launched in France ended, referring to the disruptive role streaming media services were about to play worldwide. The disruptive role of streaming media demarks a paradigm shift, a generational change from the rise of broadcast television in the 1950s to the cable television boom in the 1980s to the streaming revolution in the 2010s (Lobato, 2019). This shift impacts the formation and circulation of cultural memory as we highlighted in relation to the network and salience effects.
Discussing the history of audiovisual, Carlón (2020) emphasizes the characteristics widely spread by streaming platforms in a post-television scenario, such as the disappearance of the programming schedule, the full season drop, the cinema production quality, the subscription business model, but above all, the change in the relationship with viewers, including transmedia strategies and personalized recommendations operated by algorithms based on viewers’ preferences.

The platformization of cultural production, and consequently, of cultural memory, such as in the case of *Chernobyl*, can be problematic in relation to “the end-user/platform relationship and comprises detailed explorations of how the socio-technical features of platforms allow and prompt both cultural producers and end-users particular types of activities, connections, and knowledge” (Nieborg et al., 2019: 88). Audiences’ choices depend not only on their own preferences but also on the streaming services’ interface and packaging of options, tailored by algorithms. These interactional practices intensify the dynamics of what is remembered and what is forgotten by users. Nevertheless, audiences seem satisfied with the algorithmic logic behind streaming services: “The consumers are continuously offered those films and series that match their taste, and therefore please them. Like consumer livestock, they are fattened with ever-new sameness” (Han, 2018: 2).

“The proliferation of the Same” denounced by Han (2018: 2) gives us the false impression of overall agreement with our own beliefs, due to the lack of exposure to different or conflicting content. In this sense, it could be argued that in the platformization of cultural content era or the “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2016), audiences can be manipulated in various ways, from the true or false events of Chernobyl to what will be remembered or forgotten by them, but they like it. Audiences like the convenience of streaming services and the comfort of maintaining their own filter bubbles. However, high-quality cultural productions such as *Chernobyl* have the potential to (1) spread information and awareness of historical events to vast and diverse audiences worldwide, (2) to reignite discussions on complex and controversial topics such as nuclear power, (3) to alter local and global perceptions of the past as mentioned by Alexievich (Sous, 2019), and (4) to powerfully connect and combine personal and collective memories which can teach us about ourselves, our times, and our cultures (Pallister, 2019). Expressions such as “protect me from what I want” (Han, 2018: 39) and “te amo, te odio, dame más!” [love you, hate you, give me more!] (Carlón, 2020) perfectly convey audiences’ contradictory feelings within the platformization not just of culture and memory but of life.

Notwithstanding, it is necessary to highlight that there is no uniformly disruptive effect of streaming media services across the globe. The penetration and impact of streaming platforms in English-speaking markets, for instance, are far ahead of the platforms’ modest success in Africa and the Middle East (Lobato, 2019: 183). “Digital distribution does not come ‘over the top’ of culture; it must negotiate the rough terrain of markets characterized by fundamental differences in tastes, values, cultural norms, viewing habits, income levels, and connectivity” (Lobato, 2019: 181). The circulation of *Chernobyl* in pluri-medial networks shows how this cultural representation has activated the memory of the nuclear accident for different purposes, such as anti-nuclear activism, anti-communism, or climate change debates, shaping cultural memory across national borders.

More importantly, Erll (2011: 113) poses that “cultural memory is unthinkable without media,” and Hagedoorn (2013) updates the original conceptualization of cultural memory, connecting it to digital formats of media distribution. In addition to the role of media at the individual level, Erll (2011: 113) stresses that in the collective dimension, the construction and circulation of cultural memory are “only possible with the aid of media.” Print media, radio, television, and the Internet play a primary role in the dynamics of remembering and forgetting cultural content.

In the three-dimension analysis, we not only explored the disciplinary triangulation between (trans)media, literature, and memory at the inter-, intra-, and pluri-medial levels but also addressed
the construction and circulation of cultural memory from the production to the reception of the mini-series in multiple media environments and across borders, depicting the social, cultural, and political impact of streaming media productions. Moreover, the Chernobyl case discussed in this paper builds the bridge between the personal memories of those who experienced the nuclear accident and the collective understanding of the event. “Personal memories can only gain social relevance through media representation and distribution” (Erll, 2011: 113), and the HBO mini-series illustrates this inherent amalgamation of media and memory, showing how cultural memory is shaped in the (main)stream and is circulated via a widely penetrating distribution tool. This is what we will remember (Gessen, 2019).

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