Representations of the Chernobyl catastrophe in Soviet and post-Soviet cinema: the narratives of apocalypse

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to explore how the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986 has been represented in seven feature films from the three countries mostly affected by the nuclear disaster: Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. The narratological analysis indicates that the films from all of these three countries represent Chernobyl as an apocalyptic event making personal rebirth possible. Although the context of this rebirth is diverse – it could be political, emotional/sexual, religious or existential – the narrative of these films is similarly structured, namely according to a temporal pattern of kairos rather than chronos, thus defining the end (apocalypse) in terms of the supreme time to act (kairos), rather than the final end in a historical chain of events (chronos).

KEYWORDS
Apocalyptic narrative; kairos; chronos; Chernobyl; exclusion zone

Introduction
More than 30 years have passed since the catastrophe at the Chernobyl power plant in 1986 took place in Ukraine, still referred to as the world’s greatest nuclear disaster ever. A generally accepted interpretation in the Soviet context is that the wreckage of the fourth reactor at the Ukrainian power plant should be regarded as a consequence of the dysfunctional system that at this point was coming to an end. This political aspect of the nuclear disaster is certainly unmistakeable in the Perestroika and early post-Soviet era, a fact which is substantiated in the analysis of the two Chernobyl films produced in 1990, which are included in this article. However, the following study of seven feature films made by directors from the three countries most affected by this nuclear catastrophe – Ukraine, Russia and Belarus – reveals that the narrative structure in these films is surprisingly homogenous, representing Chernobyl not primarily by its negative consequences, but rather in terms of a positive force contributing to rebirth. Although the political aspect of the catastrophe is found to be important, especially in the films from 1990, this rebirth is not primarily represented in relation to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of a new society, but as taking place on a personal level, intimately connected to the characters’ discovery of profound existential, moral and religious values.
The tendency among directors to link the Chernobyl catastrophe to positive values has already been observed, however primarily on a collective level. In her article on Chernobyl films, Olga Bryukhovetska detects three positive aspects of the catastrophe: firstly, clean-up workers’ efforts to clear radiation in the zone become a symbol for the heroic deeds of the Soviet people; secondly, this catastrophe contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union; and finally, Chernobyl was a catastrophe ‘functioning as a national “brand”’, putting Ukraine on the map (Bryukhovetska 2016, 101). This study, highlighting the fact that Chernobyl is represented as a trigger for personal rebirth, takes its departure in the presence of a specific kind of narrative, here referred to in terms of an ‘apocalyptic narrative’. The term ‘apocalyptic narrative’ was coined by David Bethea in his analyses of pre- or post-revolutionary novels, for instance Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita and Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago. While the October Revolution in 1917 serves as an eschatological turning point for these narratives, the Chernobyl accident establishes the current historical crisis relevant for the following analysis. Just as in Bethea’s study, this apocalyptic narrative refers to ‘a canonical subtext that plays an important role both thematically and structurally in the parent text’ (Bethea 1989, 34), and also here, this subtext is constituted by the Revelation of St John. A frequent symbol in the Soviet and post-Soviet literature on the Chernobyl catastrophe is the star Wormwood, named after the plant with a bitter taste, that falls down to earth, poisoning the rivers and pointing towards the approaching Apocalypse. One reason why this biblical motif occupies such a central position in the memory of Chernobyl is related to the star’s name in the Bible, and its connections with the wormwood plant. Actually, an Artemisia plant very closely related to wormwood (polyn gorkaia – mugwort (polyn obyknovennia)) – is in Russian/ Belarusan/ Ukrainian also called Chernobylnik/ Charnobylnik/ Chornobilnik (Book of Revelation, Chapter 8, verse 10 and 11). The fact that this symbol from the Revelation of St John is present only in one of these films is significant. Nevertheless, the Revelation of St John is present in these cinematic narratives, mainly because of the specific narrative structure, linking the apocalyptic to the Revelation.

In this article, I will demonstrate that the Chernobyl catastrophe is narrated according to a specific spatio-temporality, representing the apocalypse not as the end in a historical chain of events (chronos), but rather as ‘the supreme time to do something’ (kairos). These two different views on the apocalypse are related to Nikolai Berdiaev’s philosophical writing on the contradiction between Slavic and Western culture, defining Slavic consciousness as eschatologically oriented, in comparison to Western culture: ‘In Orthodoxy the expression of the eschatological side of Christianity was stronger than anything/.…/. The Russian people are a people of the end, and not of the intervening historical process (Berdyaev 1947, 129). While the end in Western thinking is perceived as something negative, since constituting the final end of a linear chain of events, the end in Slavic consciousness is linked to positive values, since regarded as the prerequisite for the beginning of something new. Interestingly, the apocalyptic temporality of kairos, emphasizing the end as the possibility for the ‘I’ to start anew, is found to be important also on a collective level, namely in terms of a mythical discourse, emphasizing a cyclic, rather than a chronological, perception of history: the collapse of one empire, contributes to the rebirth of another empire.

This theoretical and philosophical background explains why the films represent the catastrophe at the Chernobyl power plant in 1986 as an apocalyptic event paving the way for the possibilities of the characters in the films to transform themselves, and to become morally more conscious and righteous. Although the context of this personal rebirth
triggered by Chernobyl is diverse – it can take place in a political, emotional/sexual, religious, or existential context – the temporal structure is similarly composed, representing the Chernobyl catastrophe in terms of a ‘higher message’, contributing to the rebirth of the characters. Just as Bethea notes in his analyses of the pre- and post-revolutionary novels, the importance of the revelation is made visible ‘by introducing a character who comes from a temporality beyond and who presents a revelatory message to other characters still “trapped in history”’ (Bethea 1989, 105). In the films analysed in this article, this narrative pattern, representing an ‘immortal messenger’, who seems to be privy to a “secret wisdom” from another space-time, and contrasted to the “mortal receiver” of this message’ (Bethea 1989, 33), is frequent but not obligatory.

Initially, rather few films were made on the catastrophe, and mostly they were produced to commemorate anniversaries, but gradually the theme became more popular. The first four films produced in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, explicitly referring to Chernobyl, are neatly organised both temporally and geographically. In order to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Chernobyl, two films were released: the Belarusian film Volki v zone/Wolves in the Zone (Deriugin 1990) and the Ukrainian film Rozpad/Disintegration (Belikov 1990). The 20th anniversary of Chernobyl was honoured with the release of the Belarusian film Ia pomniu/I Remember (Sychev 2005) and the Ukrainian film Avrora, ili chto snitsia spishej krasavitsy/Aurora, Or What Sleeping Beauty Was Dreaming About (Bayrak 2006). It is noticeable, that Russian films only implicitly referred to the catastrophe until its 25th anniversary, when V Subbotu/Innocent Saturday was made (Mindadze 2011). Because of the need to restrict the material of this analysis, only one of these Russian films, implicitly referring to Chernobyl, will be included in the analysis, namely Zavtra/Tomorrow (Pankratov 1991). In 2013, the Ukrainian TV mini-series Motylki/Inseparable was produced, consisting of four 50-minute episodes. By the end of 2019, the Russian TV series Chernobyl, directed by Aleksei Muradov, will be broadcasted on the Russian Channel NTV. In October 2019, the Russian film Chernobyl. Zona otchuzhdenia/Chernobyl. Zone of Exclusion, directed by Dmitrii Kiselev, has premiere. The film has been promoted as a science fiction thriller.

The following analysis is structured into four sub-sections to highlight four different contexts in which the narrative pattern of chronos is played down in favour of kairos. The first section explores the temporality of kairos in relation to the existential crises of the main hero in Mindadze’s film Innocent Saturday. Instead of trying to escape from the dangerous zone in order to survive (chronos), this radioactively contaminated area is represented in terms of a mythical space in which the main character must stay in order to find himself, existentially (kairos).

In the second section, the specific temporality of kairos is represented in the context of love as represented in two romantic films on Chernobyl: Tomorrow (1991) and Inseparable (2013). The radioactive zone is presented as a perfect place for love. It is geographically excluded from the rest of the world (the exclusion zone) and temporally untied from historical time (chronos), which could be an explanation to why the young couples in these two films do not seem eager to escape the radioactive area. Rather, they are tied to the exclusion zone because of their mutual love and they prove their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the other by the reluctance of leaving the radioactive zone. Despite the great time span, the Russian speaking Ukrainian TV series Inseparable, produced 20 years later than the Russian film Tomorrow, use frequent intertextual references to this first romantic film on Chernobyl.
The third section presents an analysis of the Ukrainian film *Aurora* and the Belarusian film *I Remember*. The main focus in these two films is not mutual love and total self-devotion, but rather the rebirth of the male character at the expense of the female protagonist. The section concludes with an analysis of the Belarusian film *Wolves in the Zone*, which represents the journey to the exclusion zone as an existential and religious journey home.

The final section presents an analysis of the Soviet feature film *Disintegration* that exemplifies that the political interpretation of Chernobyl – a catastrophe contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union – predominates in the Soviet and early post-Soviet era. However, this political disintegration has also a personal dimension, thus linking the political aspect of this apocalypse to the theme of personal rebirth. Additionally, the apocalyptic temporality of *kairos*, emphasizing the end as the possibility for the ‘I’ to start anew, is paralleled on a collective level, representing Chernobyl according to a mythical thinking, underlining a cyclic, rather than a chronological perception of history: the collapse of one empire, contributes to the rebirth of another empire.

**Innocent Saturday: beyond action movie genre**

*Innocent Saturday* depicts the 24 hours that followed the explosion at reactor four on the morning of 26 April, when the citizens in Pripyat still were ignorant of the catastrophe that had just occurred about 3 km away. Most of the film action takes place at a wedding-party, at which the film’s main character, Valerii Kabysh, plays in a band together with his friends. Valerii, a party official of lower rank, is one of the very few that knows about the accident at the power plant. The fact that he is aware of the catastrophe is obvious in his frequent, restless running escapes that never succeed. Indeed, something is hindering Valerii from his escape, but the obstacles are not external; he is not, as in a classical action movie, stopped by a corrupt Soviet power, or by any checkpoints cutting off his road. Rather, the reason for his inability to escape is to be found in the film’s apocalyptic narrative: he needs to remain in the apocalyptic time-space in order to become transformed (*kairos*), thus finding what Andrea Oppo refers to as the ‘true face of the “I”’. As Oppo further explains, ‘the end set in the present shows the true face of the “I”, in that it transforms what is “identical” in the “living one”. By dismissing the objectified identity, it opens the subject, the person, to a radical experience of salvation from within’ (Oppo 2013, 24).

The main concern of *Innocent Saturday* refers to the question: what existential impact does this great catastrophe have on peoples’ lives? After having heard about the wreckage in the fourth reactor, Valerii becomes aware of the need to change his former life, and it is symptomatic that he does not want his girlfriend Irina to escape with him, but he runs straight to the dormitory where Vera, a girl he has been secretly in love with for a long time, lives. In contrast to a traditional action movie narrative, these characters give up their attempts at escaping far too readily, letting themselves be hindered by futile, everyday events, that should be easily dealt with. The first example of a trivial obstacle interrupting Valerii’s and Vera’s escape occurs in the beginning of the film, when they are running towards the train-station. All of the sudden, Vera breaks her high heel and they miss the train. But instead of waiting at the station for the next train to come, they go to a shoe-shop, where a delivery of Rumanian shoes just arrived. When Vera tries on endless pairs of high-heeled shoes, Valerii conducts his first strange running-tour: he runs out of the shop and jumps up on a truck, and within a few minutes he jumps of the truck and runs...
back into the shop again (Figure 1). The lack of rational and causal motivation contributes to a narrative ‘excess’, inviting the viewer to interpret this and Valerii’s subsequent attempts of ‘escape’ metaphorically as a physical expression of an inner crisis, triggered by the catastrophe.

The next obstacle for escape takes place when Vera has to get her passport at the restaurant where she sings in a band. Instead of leaving straight away, she decides to stay and sing with the band, saying that she has already been paid for this gig. After this incident, no more rational explanations are given to why Valerii’s and Vera’s escape is interrupted. Instead, the characters flee into a world of booze, music, dance, flirting and fights, and the last sequence clearly illustrates that this narrative is not about the attempt to survive physically (to escape from the catastrophe area), but to become transformed mentally, which on the contrary postulates closeness to the apocalypse. The last scene of the film depicts Valerii, waking up in a boat on the Pripyat river together with his drunk and laughing friends. His head lies in Vera’s knee and he is staring right up in the face of the wrecked power plant. He raises his fist, and hereafter everything gets black – a final image representing Valerii’s obstructed view when Vera bends over him, but possibly also an image of the initiated, however unresolved existential crisis (Figure 2).

Mindadze’s decision to depict the world’s greatest nuclear accident through the existential dilemmas of the main character certainly confounds viewers’ expectation, which is probably the reason why he and his film crew chose to label the film as an ‘action of feelings’ (ekshen chuvstv). If ignoring the fact that this is an existential drama, primarily dealing with issues of identity in the post-Soviet era, triggered by the Chernobyl catastrophe, the depiction of this incapacitated main character, running around in circles, magnetically drawn to the collapsed reactor as if by a mystic force, can be incomprehensible, which was noted when the film was shown at the film festival in Berlin 2011; the non-Russian speaking critics were frustrated and confused by this anti-hero, while in Russia and Ukraine the critics and the viewers in their reviews and online discussions agreed that this is a film dealing with identity-problems connected to the Soviet culture of heroism, such as the lack of personal responsibility and self-preservation (Lindbladh 2012, 116).

**Figure 1.** Valerii running. *Innocent Saturday* (2011), Alexandr Mindadze.

*Tomorrow, or the Nuclear Princess: love in the zone of exclusion*

*Tomorrow, or the Nuclear Princess* depicts the love between a girl and boy, who by accident meet at a train station nearby an unspecified town close to the nuclear reactor that will
The dialogue between Maia and Kirill at the station is overtly symbolic, foreshadowing the upcoming catastrophe. This temporal reference to the future is also underlined by the first part of the film’s title – *Tomorrow* – while the second part of the title – *the Nuclear Princess* – is an epithet, symbolically linking Maia to the radioactively contaminated exclusion zone. At this first meeting, Kirill asks for Maia’s address and phone number, but Maia suggests that they should meet in exactly the same place one week later ‘whatever happens’ (*chtoby ne proizoshlo*). This episode fits within Bethea’s definition of an apocalyptic narrative, representing Maia as an ‘immortal messenger’, who seems to be privy to a “secret wisdom” from another space-time (Bethea 1989, 33). Maia, the ‘Nuclear Princess’, insists that they should meet in a place and a time where the catastrophe will take place, which makes her in a possession of a mystical knowledge of the catastrophe to come.

Kirill, on the other hand, fits the definition of what Bethea refers to as the ‘mortal receiver’ of this message (Bethea 1989, 33). He is the one that accepts and follows the message received from Maia. He is also the one in the film, whose life before the catastrophe is represented, which makes him appear as more human and mortal, compared to Maia. Actually, Maia’s previous life is never represented in the film’s narrative chain of events, but only retold by her to Kirill when they find themselves isolated from the rest of the world in the exclusion zone. Also, the story she tells is more reminiscent of a fairy tale than a true-life narrative. Thus, Maia’s role as an ‘immortal messenger’ is underlined by the fact that she, according to the film’s narrative perspective, appears as ‘a character who comes from a temporality beyond and who presents a revelatory message to other characters still trapped in history’ (Bethea 1989, 105). Kirill, the ‘mortal receiver’, can be released from an identity, ‘trapped in history’ (*chronos*), and thanks to the apocalypse and his meeting with this ‘Nuclear Princess’ become transformed (*kairos*).

Nevertheless, this closeness to the apocalypse and death in the exclusion zone is ambivalent for both of them. On the one hand, this apocalyptic time-space is perfect for their mutual love. Since the place is both deserted and dangerous, their reluctance to leave the exclusion zone, could be viewed as a proof of their willingness to live only for the sake of their mutual love. On the other hand, although both of them are prepared to sacrifice their own life, they both want the other to survive, which leads to a contradictory wish to leave...
the radioactive landscape. At first, it is Kirill who wants them to leave the exclusion zone, referring to the fact that he wants Maia to survive, whereas later in the film the dynamic changes. Now, Maia is the one who wants them to leave the dangerous area, but only in order to save her beloved Kirill. When Kirill refers to Maia’s previous unwillingness to leave the zone, her answer is: ‘I don’t care for myself, do you understand? But you must live’ (Mne vse ravno, ponimaesh’, a ne tebe. Ty eshche zhit’ dolzhem). Kirill responds: ‘And what about you?’ (A ty?), on which Maia answers: ‘Me?’ (Ia?). Maia’s last question clearly illustrate a thinking in which self-preservation is irrelevant, and her request to leave the zone is exclusively a result of the strong affection she feels towards Kirill. Nevertheless, the urge to stay in the zone takes over and the film ends with Maia and Kirill performing their own kind of wedding ceremony in an old church, with candle lights, icons and sacred music. Thus, they both prefer to stay close to the apocalypse, because only here, within this spatio-temporality in which the end is ‘set in the present’, a true self-transformation is made possible, thus showing the ‘true face of the “I”’ (Oppo 2013, 24).

**Inseparable: Personal and patriotic love in the zone of exclusion**

*Inseparable* (2013) by Vitalii Vorob’ev is the first historically based action drama on the Chernobyl catastrophe. The film’s budget was considerable, covering the expensive CGI based on archival material, both from the two towns located close to the Chernobyl power plant – Pripyat and Chernobyl – and from the power plant. Still, the film offers the mythical perception of Chernobyl. Its narrative structure easily fits the apocalyptic narrative, representing the importance of self-sacrifice both on a personal (love) and social (heroism) level. Regardless of whether this sacrifice is for the sake of love for another person or for the country, this discourse is linked to the temporal structure of *kairos* rather than *chronos*.

The original title in Russian, *Motyl’ki*, refers to the moths, magnetically drawn towards light despite the danger, offering a fitting metaphor for most of the Chernobyl films’ narratives, especially *Innocent Saturday*, depicting the burning reactor as a beautiful fond holding a seducing power over the main character in the film, unwilling to escape from the exclusion zone despite the danger. While Mindadze refers to *Innocent Saturday* as an ‘action of feelings’, *Inseparable* is promoted as a film ‘entirely about love’ (Vorob’ev quoted in Kondrateva 2014). Like in *Tomorrow*, the abandoned radioactive town in *Inseparable* becomes a mythical space excluding everything but the characters’ strong feelings of love. The many similar scenes depicting the young couple making themselves at home in the deserted city, clearly illustrate a temporality terminating a chronological, historical narrative and replacing it with *kairos*. Everything is left as it was when the town was evacuated, and it is as if historical time has ceased to exist, constituting instead a mythical time. Nevertheless, unlike in *Tomorrow*, in *Inseparable* the political dimension of self-devotion in the name of love is evoked, and this TV series offers an abundance of heroic deeds that were conducted in the zone soon after the catastrophe. Many sequences in the series represent the heroic deeds performed by the clean-up workers in the exclusion zone right after the catastrophe, among them, the orphan boy Pasha, who is the male protagonist in this love story.

The narrative of *Inseparable* is simple and engaging. Heroic acts are praised and awarded, while cowardice is punished. Even more importantly, like in the master plot of socialist
realist cinema, a politically and morally immature character gets a second chance, and when improving during the narrative, he usually is finally transformed into a morally good citizen. The first episode of the series narrates the story of the two sisters Alia and Mariana, who live in Kyiv with their grandfather. They decide to visit a relative in Pripyat and during their journey, in the dead of night on 26 April 1986, the reactor at the Chernobyl power plant explodes. The older sister, Mariana, who is a nurse, commits herself to humanitarian aid work close to the disaster area, while the younger sister, Alia, falls in love with Pasha, the orphan boy who sacrifices his life as a clean-up worker in the exclusion zone. Even though Pasha later deserts from the clean-up work in the exclusion zone, he is politically and morally excused within the film’s narrative, given his acute radiation syndrome, subsequently leading to his painful death. The symptoms start already when hiding together with his beloved Alia in the exclusion zone, and when he finally collapses, Alia shows that she is prepared to sacrifice herself for him, carrying him along the deserted road in a wheelbarrow (Figure 3).

In order to highlight the heroism of these three brave characters, a counter-narrative is presented, focussing on a character acting in an unpatriotic and unheroic way, who is trying to save his own skin instead of fulfilling the duties for his country. This counter-narrative tells the story of Igor, the ‘sissy’ fiancé of Mariana, who lives in Pripyat and just got his medical doctor diploma. The contrast between the patriotic and unpatriotic narrative is also emphasised geographically. When Alia and Mariana go to Pripyat, during the fatal night of 26 April – a journey that will lead them into a heroic and self-sacrificing destiny – Igor travels in the opposite direction, leaving Pripyat for Kyiv with the intent to escape the catastrophe area, thus neglecting his duty as a citizen and a doctor. On his arrival at Mariana’s and Alia’s apartment in Kyiv, Igor meets with the two sisters’ grandfather. When it becomes clear that Igor chose to take a vacation, instead of accepting his duty as a doctor, the old man leaves the room and returns with his military uniform jacket over his shoulders – a silent rejection of Igor’s coward and unheroic behaviour, emphasizing the importance of accepting one’s duty to serve the country and its people, accompanied by the clinking of the war-hero medals on his uniform. Taking this moral lesson from an older war-hero, Igor goes back to the catastrophe area and finally, when forced to assist a woman giving birth close to the exclusion zone, he is ‘reborn’ and accepts his duty as a doctor to work with radiation injuries.

Figure 3. Alia carrying Pasha in a wheelbarrow on a deserted road in the zone of exclusion. Inseparable (2013), Vitalii Vorob’ev.
In the last episode, Mariana dies as a hero from radiation sickness and Alia, impregnated in the exclusion zone by Pasha – by now a deceased hero – decides to keep her child, but only after having overheard a conversation between two women at the abortion clinic, saying that in some pregnancies the child survives without any injuries, while the mother, whose organism has absorbed all the radiation, dies after the delivery. Thus, the iconic theme of an orphan child is continued in this film, not only represented by the orphan boy Pasha, but also in Pasha’s and Alia’s little girl who is born in the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe. At the end of the last episode, we see this orphan girl as a grown up, visiting the exclusion zone on a tourist bus. At first, the events are represented in black and white, but when this girl observes he inscription ‘Alia + Pasha’ in a phone booth and becomes connected to the history of the strong love experienced by her parents in the exclusion zone, the film changes to colour and ends with images of the girl on the bus leaving this site of memory.

**Aurora and I Remember: sacrifice and rebirth in the aftermath of Chernobyl**

The Ukrainian film *Aurora* (2006) by Oksana Bayrak is a story about subliminal love between the orphan Chernobyl-girl Aurora, dying from leukaemia and longing for a father, and Astakhov, an emigrant, middle-aged, decadent, former Soviet ballet-artist, who deep down is longing for moral resurrection. This sentimental production is unrealistic in its depiction of the actual events that took place in the aftermath of Chernobyl as there were no orphanages in Pripyat and no Chernobyl victims were transported to American hospitals. Thus, the film needs to be interpreted as a kind of fairy tale, as suggested by its title: *Aurora, Or What Sleeping Beauty Was Dreaming About*, recalling the well-known story about princess Aurora, cursed to eternal sleep by an evil fairy, a spell that can only be broken by true love. In a key scene, when Aurora visits the dress rehearsal of *The Sleeping Beauty*, a ballet that Astakhov stages in her honour, she is beautifully dressed up as the Sleeping Beauty, which overtly links her to the fairy-tale character.

During the first part of the film, Astakhov is depicted as abominable in every possible respect: a lousy father, a dreadful husband, and a poor artist who lacks inspiration. Thanks to his meeting with Aurora in an American hospital, everything changes and gradually Astakhov becomes aware of his own moral decay. They become close friends, and when he sees Aurora’s passionate joy for life and ballet and her subsequent fading away due to her radiation illness, Astakhov finds the strength to re-invent his life. Towards the end of the film, he is back together with his pregnant girlfriend, he is reunited with his son, and he is creative again. Finally, he stages *The Sleeping Beauty* as a children’s ballet in order to pay for Aurora’s spinal cord transplantation. Aurora, on the other hand, is the perfect victim, equipped with two classical Soviet attributes linking her to the sacrifice; she dreams about becoming a prima ballerina (the dark side of the glorious and successful Soviet ballet is merciless self-starvation and painful body-control), and she is an orphan, which means that she is entirely dependent on the Great Soviet family. As Bryukhovetska notices, the name of the heroine which is also the title of the film, is rich with references; besides the aforementioned references to *The Sleeping Beauty*, the name Aurora also links the little girl in the film to the Russian cruiser ‘Aurora’, which played an important role during the October Revolution in 1917. While Bryukhovetska regards these references to Aurora as ‘an empty play of signifiers from which a meaningful history has evaporated’ (Bryukhovetska 2016, 117), both the
reference to the October Revolution and *The Sleeping Beauty* become highly relevant in this study, since it links the Chernobyl victim Aurora to the sphere of immortality and rebirth; the birth of a radically new society after the crash of the Tsarist power and the eternal sleep of Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*. According to one version of this medieval story, the Princess becomes pregnant, giving birth to a child while asleep (Zipes 2001, 648). However, Aurora’s ‘eternal sleep’ does not lead to giving birth to a child but to the rebirth of the prodigal son, Astakhov.

Similarly to the other films, *Aurora* also presents the apocalyptic narrative, featuring an ‘immortal messenger’ and a ‘mortal receiver’. When Aurora and Astakhov first meet in the hospital, Aurora wants to give Astakhov her poster ‘Sovietskii balet’, showing a picture of him as a young ballet dancer, when he made a guest performance at the Bolshoi Theatre. This is her most precious possession from the orphan home, where she was dreaming about becoming a prima ballerina. Although she uses the picture as a way to remind him of himself before he emigrated to the United States, it is not quite clear why she wants him to have the picture. However, in relation to the structure of an apocalyptic narrative, this gift appears meaningful. The poster is delivered by Aurora, who is linked to immortality. Astakhov becomes the ‘mortal receiver’ of this ‘higher message’: an image of himself as a young, promising, Soviet ballet-dancer. At this point in the narrative, Astakhov refuses to acknowledge his past and tears up the image of himself, repeating that his name is not Nikolai Astakhov but James Brown. Aurora collects the pieces and tapes the poster together, apart from one piece that is left in Astakhov’s room. In the middle of the film, when Aurora’s health condition becomes worse, and she is transferred to the intensive care unit, Astakhov receives the taped poster from a nurse. When she asks whether it is him on the poster, he answers: ‘Yes, this is me’. Shortly after, the poster appears in a key scene of the film. Astakhov visits the sleeping Aurora and returns the taped poster to her, putting it on her bed. Now, the image of himself is complete; he has added the missing piece left in his room. This is also the first time Astakhov sees Aurora with her shaved head, and this iconic image of suffering in the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe completes his moral awakening. The interconnection between Astakhov’s rebirth and Aurora’s close death is represented in a montage of images that take place in Astakhov’s imagination after he leaves the sleeping Aurora. This montage shows a small girl dancing ballet, (symbolizing the *dream* of Aurora), intertwined with painful images of her hair being cut off (foreshadowing Aurora’s death). Towards the end of this montage of images, Astakhov enters the hospital corridor and the sliding doors close behind him. The bright light lingering in the empty white corridor evokes death. The next, one and a half minute long, shot shows a close-up of Aurora’s shaved head as she cries. Slowly, the camera gets closer and closer to her wide-open eyes, as she stares right into the lens, as if facing approaching death (Figure 4).

Like in *Aurora*, the narrative of *I Remember* presents a middle-aged, male artist who is reborn thanks to the sacrifice of a woman. However, in this film the artist, Anatolii Buzov, is a Chernobyl victim; he originates from an area in Belarus, close to the Chernobyl power plant and both his parents and little brother died in the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe. Although 20 years have passed, Anatolii still cannot adapt to his current life in Minsk. As he claims to one of his friends, he regards himself more as dead than alive. This feeling is ironically underlined in the beginning of the film, taking place at his vernissage. Just after his girlfriend tells him that she is leaving him, Anatolii overhears one of the guests, telling
his friend that he thinks the artist is dead: 'He died recently, I heard that from somewhere' (A on umer, ia gde-to ob etom slyshal). As if responding to this statement, Anatolii decides to return to his home village, still a radioactively contaminated area, to die in peace. However, instead of death, this return to his former home in the radioactive area makes him experience rebirth. Here, the artistic inspiration returns to him. Moreover, his fiancée chooses to go with him, and finally their child is born in the contaminated area. After a close-up shot of the mother and a smiling infant, the film ends with Anatolii painting his happy life in the radioactive area. Noting the film’s eagerness to be politically correct, Bryukhovetska connects the ending of this film to Lukashenko’s policy of revival of the zone at the expense of memory (Bryukhovetska 2016, 112). Perceived as another variant of an apocalyptic narrative, connecting the apocalypse to the possibility of starting anew, the film’s ending marks the character’s break up with his ‘false’ life in Minsk where he felt more dead than alive. Despite obvious health risks, he decides to start a family in his home village, thus choosing a genuine life according to kairos in the post-catastrophe area, where he and his family were traumatised twenty years ago.

**Wolves in the Zone: reconnecting to childhood-memories in the zone of exclusion**

In her article ‘Nuclear Belonging’, Bryukhovetska recognises in four Chernobyl films a narrative pattern of a travel to the zone as a journey home (Bryukhovetska 2016, 111). This motif, evident in *I Remember*, is also present in the Soviet film *Wolves in the Zone* (1990) by the Belarusian director Viktor Deriugins. It depicts the extensive criminal activities in the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe, consisting of stealing and selling radioactively contaminated items and products, thus jeopardizing the health of Soviet citizens. In this film, the representation of the apocalyptic event and post-apocalyptic landscape is reminiscent of two of Tarkovsky’s films, *Ivan’s Childhood* (1962) and *Stalker* (1979). While the traumatized by the war experience protagonist of *Ivan’s Childhood* experiences flashbacks from his bright and happy childhood, the protagonist in *Wolves in the Zone* recollects his childhood in the small Belarusian village, which is now an empty place since the evacuation in 1986. In parallel with Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, this film represents the radioactive zone as a mystical space. The first sequence of the film shows a dark, foggy landscape from above. It shows a bus passing a checkpoint and wolves passing by barbwires, catching a pray. Like in *Stalker*, the abandoned zone is represented as dangerous for visitors and, thus, they are dependent on a person, who lives in harmony with this landscape. In *Wolves in the Zone*, this mystical man showing up
now and then without any explanation, is not referred to as a ‘Stalker’ as in Tarkovsky’s film, but as a ‘Zone-Man’ (*chelovek zona*). Like in *Stalker*, this mystic character reflects an apocalyptic narrative, in which an ‘immortal messenger’ interacts with a ‘mortal receiver’. The main character travels to the exclusion zone, not only to contest criminality, but also, as in *I Remember*, in search for the truth about himself which he hopes to find in his childhood village. His journey to the zone is in other words necessary for his existential transformation (*kairos*) in a post-apocalyptic space. The Zone-Man contributes to this inner journey of the protagonist, as he saves his life. The last diegetic words in the film consist of a rudimentary turn-taking, underlining the significance of the meeting between the ‘mortal receiver’ and the ‘immortal messenger’ in an apocalyptic narrative; the protagonist asks: ‘Who are you (*Ty kto?*) and he answers ‘Zone-Man’ (*chelovek zona*). The scene ends with a close-up image of an icon and a candle light, emphasizing the religious dimension of this encounter between earth (‘mortal receiver’) and heaven (‘immortal messenger’). The next, final scene of the film, represents a long shot of a landscape, showing a cross in the background, a man seeding the ground, walking towards a woman praying in front of him. Gradually, the camera slowly zooms out from this landscape, thus marking the end of the film. Together with the director’s voiceover, concluding the film, this camera movement stresses the universal and religious dimension of the main character’s return to the place where he was born: ‘If a child is taken away early from the maternal breast it will survive, but will be sick; the same will happen to a human from whom God was taken away.’

**Disintegration: Chernobyl debunking lies and corruption**

The Ukrainian Soviet film *Disintegration* (*Rozpad* 1990) by Mikhail Belikov was made a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In parallel with *Wolves in the Zone*, the representation of the Chernobyl catastrophe partly aims at criticizing the corrupt and anti-humanistic Soviet system that is coming to an end. The title, *Rozpad/Raspad* can be referred to: atomic disintegration (*atomnyi raspad*), the disintegration of the Soviet Union (*raspad Sovetskogo Sotsuza*), the disintegration of the main character’s family (*raspad semi*) and, finally, the disintegration of moral values (*raspad tsennostei*). Although the disintegration after the apocalypse (Chernobyl) is represented both on a personal and collective level, the analysis of this film indicates that the temporality of *kairos* is first and foremost visible on a collective, historical level, representing a mythical, cyclic temporality, suggesting that the apocalypse of Chernobyl contributes to the birth of a new empire.

The film consists of one main plot and two sub-plots. The main plot depicts the story of the journalist Aleksandr Zhuravlev whose private and social life is falling apart, which occurs before and after the Chernobyl catastrophe. A trip to the exclusion zone saves him from this life-crisis, and after returning home in Kyiv, he gets the opportunity to start anew. One of the sub-plots features a little boy, who has lost both of his parents in the Chernobyl catastrophe. Thus, *Disintegration* initiated the recurring theme of an orphan child in the cinematic representations of Chernobyl. The second sub-plot focuses on a newlywed couple, spending the first days of their honeymoon in a tent in the radiated woods outside Pripyat. The image of a young and innocent couple, hiding in the radioactive area from the military, is emblematic for ‘Chernobyl films’. While the young couple lack any protection from radioactivity, the military are dressed in safety clothing and respiratory masks. However, in contrast to the two people in love presented in *Tomorrow* and *Inseparable*, the couple from *Disintegration*
does not hide in one of the apartments, shops or restaurants in an evacuated town, but in a barn in the countryside together with some cows, left to starve to death. When the adolescents finally understand what has happened, they want to get a real wedding ceremony in one of the Orthodox churches in the zone, a scene which is similar to the last sequence of the film *Tomorrow*, when the loving couple performs a kind of wedding ceremony in an old Orthodox church in the radioactively contaminated area. Nevertheless, in contrast to *Tomorrow*, released one year after *Disintegration*, the sacred atmosphere of the church interior in *Disintegration* is represented ironically: the priest is eager to get out from the church because of his fear for radiation, and the Easter Ceremony is interrupted by liquidators with respiratory masks, in haste, removing the radioactive Easter eggs from the altar.

The two parallel sub-plots loosen the narrative structure of *Disintegration*, however it is strengthened by recurring motif of the Greek. The film starts with the arrival at Kyiv of the main character, Aleksander, who has been away on a mission in Greece. In his apartment, his friends gather to celebrate his return from Athens. They are all dressed in chitons and they wear laurel wreath, reminding of Ancient Greece. Moreover, it transpires that Aleksandr’s ancestors on his father’s side are from Greece, which is why his father (a former KGB agent) wants him to bring some Greek soil for when he is buried. The motif of Greece is not only linked with cultural heritage, but also with the theme of falsity and betrayal. Aleksandr forgets his promise and instead of Greek soil, he brings his father handfuls of soil from a backyard in the neighbourhood. Aleksandr’s cheat is an act of moral betrayal. When his father receives the ‘Greek soil’, he says: ‘finally, I can die in peace’ (*teper’ mozhno umirat’ spokoino*) and the next shot zooms in on an Orthodox church whose bells are ringing for mass. Another example of linking the theme of Greece with the motif of falsity occurs when Aleksandr welcomes his party guests and refers to the chiton with the words: ‘Dear Greek friends. The chiton can’t be washed. It is a disposable product.’ (*Tovarishchi greki, khitony ne stirat’. Oni odnorazovye pol’zovania*). Hereby, the motif of Greece represents fake values rather than real heritage and identity.

The abundance of Greek motifs raises a question: Why the Greek heritage is linked to falsity and lie? The motif of Greek heritage recurring in a perestroika film, representing the Chernobyl catastrophe as triggering the collapse of the Soviet Union, contrasts with the absence of this Greek heritage of Antiquity in early Slavic cultural history.²⁰ Hereby, the ambivalently represented motif of Greek heritage could be interpreted as a reminder of the fact that this cultural heritage, in contrast to the Latin speaking parts of the world, actually was absent in the development of Slavic culture. However, there is also another historical link between Greek heritage and Slavic culture that is relevant in this context, namely the fact that Prince Vladimir in 988 decided to introduce the Greek orthodox church from the Byzantine empire when introducing Christianity to Kievskaià Rus’. Rather than emphasizing the lack of Greek heritage, this cultural historical background, on the contrary, underlines the importance of the Greek heritage for the development of a Slavic, cultural identity.

It is highly significant that the motif of Greece in the film is present not only in relation to personal identity (heritage, death, journey, masquerade, unfaithfulness), but also with reference to the history of an empire. This is underlined during the slide show that Aleksandr presents in the very beginning of the film, representing the ruins of ancient Greek buildings, such as Acropolis in Athens. A similar slide show occurs in another party scene concluding the film, when Aleksandr’s return from the exclusion zone is celebrated; however, this time the slide show presents the ruined exclusion zone. This narrative device of paralleling the
two slide shows juxtaposing the two cultures coming to an end, suggests that the Chernobyl power plant is a metonymy for the Soviet Union.

This parallel between the Soviet and Greek empires could be interpreted as a reminder that the cultural heritage of Antiquity has never been introduced to Rus', which explains why the Slavic culture differs from the secular tradition of the Western, Latin speaking world. However, another possibility is that the importance of the Greek heritage in relation to the development of a Slavic, collective identity should be stressed, thus evoking the imperial myth viewing the Grand Duchy of Moscow as the ‘third Rome’ after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.21 According to this imperial perspective, the heritage from Antiquity is regarded to be mediated by the Grand Duchy of Moscow (‘third Rome’), thus continuing the mission that was given to Eastern Rome/The Byzantine Empire after the fall of the Western Rome in 476.

Clearly, the circular composition of the film evokes both thematically and structurally the imperial myth of the ‘third Rome’ and, thus, it also suggests the presence of a temporal narrative of kairos; the decline of one empire contributes to the rebirth of another empire. This theme of rebirth is also underlined in a scene of a third party. Unlike the other two parties, opening and concluding the film, this party does not celebrate the return of Alexandr from any of his journeys. Also, no slide show is presented. Instead, the guests have gathered to celebrate Orthodox Easter and the resurrection of Christ, which evokes an apocalyptic narrative, linking the two other parties to the theme of apocalypse and rebirth.22 However, it is important to stress that the themes of Greece, Greek soil, Greek heritage, the Orthodox church are continuously connected with falsity and lies, which creates a critical and ironic perspective on this mythical, apocalyptic narrative. This ambivalent message is emphasised in the film’s aesthetics, reminiscent of the so called ‘Perestroika films’, produced during the mid 1980s and early 1990s, representing the various processes of radical change in contemporary Soviet society in an absurd and carnivalesque manner.23

**Conclusion**

The presented analysis does not only maps out the cinematic representations of Chernobyl by directors from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, but also demonstrates the pervasiveness of apocalyptic and eschatological themes in Slavic culture, first and foremost on a personal level, but also, as in *Disintegration*, on a collective, historical level. Actually, the analysis of the apocalyptic temporality of kairos in *Disintegration* explains why the Chernobyl catastrophe has been interpreted as an apocalyptic event contributing to the collapse of the Soviet society. Apart from the fact that this catastrophe was the result of a corrupt, stagnating system that could not care less for the citizen’s health, it was also transformed into a prominent metaphor in the Soviet and post-Soviet collective memory, connecting apocalypse to rebirth, both on a personal and collective level. In consequence, the Chernobyl catastrophe and the aftermath of the disaster – the burning power plant, the radioactively contaminated exclusion zone, acute radiation syndrome – is presented as ‘positive’ in the sense that this apocalyptic event contributes to a moral, religious, political, existential or emotional awakening.

The temporal structure of this apocalyptic narrative can be described in terms of kairos rather than chronos, which means that the radical event is represented in relation to its
impact on the characters in the present, contributing to their self-transformation, rather than as an end ‘set in the future, in a chronological view’, thus revealing ‘the ultimate meaning of history’ (Oppo 2013, 24). Evacuated areas – the nuclear town Pripyat in Disintegration or villages in Belarus in Wolves in the Zone and I Remember – are represented in terms of nostalgic, mythical, lost homes, to which the characters want to return, rather than as an area of catastrophe, from which they escape. Aside from an apocalyptic narrative, referring to the canonical subtext (the Revelation of St John), this corpus of films is connected thematically, partly due to representing the same historical events. Furthermore, all of the films feature a wedding ceremony, and many of them present an orphan child (Disintegration, Aurora and Inseparable). The motif of a fairy tale princess appears in two films (Tomorrow and Aurora). These ‘princesses’ are linked to the radioactive catastrophe and they embody an ‘immortal messenger’ figure that has a ‘positive’ impact on the male characters, ‘mortal receivers’. Also, an interesting connection between the apocalyptic narrative and the narrative of socialist realism is discovered in Vorob’ev’s TV series from 2013. In this film, the theme of love and self-sacrifice in the zone of exclusion is intertextually repeated from Tomorrow, produced 20 years earlier. However, in the current series, the strong emotions nurtured by the closeness to the apocalyptic end, contribute to emphasize the individual’s willingness to sacrifice for the nation and the collective.

Notes

1. The Wormwood star is mentioned in the epigraph to Oksana Bayrak’s film Aurora. The epigraph is constituted by a quote from one of Michel Nostradamus’ prophesies based on the Apocalypse of St John, concluding with the line: ‘and the name of this star is Chernobyl’ (Nostradamus 1555).
2. These two temporal concepts are described by Andrea Oppo in the introduction to the anthology Shapes of Apocalypse: Arts and Philosophy in Slavic Thought (2013, 20).
3. Intimately connected to this narrative pattern of apocalypse is the kenotic ethics certainly obvious in Slavic thinking, and often defined in the words of St John in the Book of Revelation (12:24): ‘Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.
4. A television series in two seasons was released and broadcasted on Russian television: Chernobyl. Zona otchuzhdenia/Chernobyl. Zone of Exclusion (Banke 2014). This series is not included in this study, since the director, Peter Banke, is from Sweden.
5. The title of the film Rozpad is Decay in the English translation of the film, but in the following the title Disintegration will be used.
6. In that same year the French-Ukrainian co-production Zemlia Zabuttia/Land of Oblivion (Boganim 2011) was released. The film fits the theoretical framework of this study, but is not included because the film director is French-Israeli. The next year, the Ukrainian short-film, Iadernye otchody/Nuclear Waste (2012) was made by the Ukrainian director Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi, a film not included in this study because it doesn’t fit the theoretical framework. The shooting of Slaboshpytskyi’s next feature film on Chernobyl, with the preliminary title Luxembourg, was recently postponed due to lack of funding (Pavlova 2016).
7. The other three Russian films, only implicitly referring to Chernobyl, are: Tretia planeta/The Third Planet (Aleksandr Rogozhkin, 1991); Monstry/Monsters (Sergei Kuchkov 1993) and Godsobaki/Dog’s Year (Semen Aranovich, 1994). While the film Monsters doesn’t fit the theoretical frames of this study, both The Third Planet and Dog’s Year are examples of films representing the radioactive landscape in the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe in terms of a mystical space making rebirth possible.
8. This film is distributed under three different titles. At first, the film was referred to as just *Zavtra/Tomorrow* (1991), but the next year a second part of the title was added: *Zavtra, ili iadernaia printsessa/ Tomorrow, or the Nuclear Princess* (1992). Later, the film appeared with yet another name: *Zavtra. Liubov' v zapretnoi zonoi/ Tomorrow. Love in the Exclusion Zone* (1997).

9. The literal translation of *Motylki* is *Moths*, but the English translation of the film, *Inseparable*, will be used in the following.

10. For more information about the TV series, see [https://www.vokrug.tv/product/show/chernobyl_2018/](https://www.vokrug.tv/product/show/chernobyl_2018/). Accessed 10 April 2018.

11. For more information about the film, see [https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/131932/annot/](https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/131932/annot/). Accessed 10 April 2019.

12. This relates to another interesting aspect of Bethea's definition of the apocalyptic narrative, namely the presence of 'a living tradition with which the work enters into dialogue and against which it asks to be read' (Bethea 1989, 34). This continuous dialogue is certainly characteristic of the feature films analysed in this study, but a complete analysis of the extensive intertextual references observed within this corpus of films lies outside the frames of this study.

13. The theme of the wedding is present in many of the films representing Chernobyl, which is of course connected to the fact that the accident occurred in a season of the year when people usually decide to marry. According to Mindadze, there were 16 weddings celebrated in Pripyat in 26 April; the day when the citizens of Pripyat still weren't informed about what had happened 3 km away at the power plant, at 1.23am on 26 April.

14. The concept of 'excess' is defined by Verstraten according to the following: 'Excess begins where motivation is lacking or, in other words, where a stylistic feature does not propel the story or serve a narrative function' (Verstraten 2009, 22). See also Kristin Thomson's essay 'The Concept of Cinematic Excess' (1977, 132).

15. See the interview with Mindadze, in which he says: 'It isn't easy to define the genre of *Innocent Saturday*. For me, it is an action of feelings.' (Mindadze 2011)

16. Chernobyl is not explicitly mentioned in this film, but in the description of the film and in comments on the Internet, this film is regarded as relating to Chernobyl. See for example on the site [Entsiklopedia saita Kino-teatr.RU](http://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/131932/annot/).

17. In the various adaptations of this medieval story, the Princess's name differs, but in Tchaikovsky's ballet she is referred to as Princess Aurora. Aside from the name Aurora, also the fact that a children's ballet of *The Sleeping Beauty* is staged in the film contributes to underline the references to Tchaikovsky's version of this fairy tale.

18. In her article in the Internet journal KinoKultura, Bryukhovetska banter with this recurring link between nuclear film and ballet (Bryukhovetska 2009).

19. Twenty years later, this sub-plot is echoed in the French-Ukrainian production *Land of Oblivion* by Michale Boganim. In both films, the boy returns to his apartment in Pripyat to search for one of his parents. In both films this boy writes a message to his missing parent in the evacuated, empty town. However, the boy in *Land of Oblivion* writes the message on the wall of their apartment and not on the ground outside their house as in *Disintegration*. Nevertheless, the message is similar. In *Disintegration*: 'Mum, I'm back. Please, come. I am waiting...' (Mama ia prishel. Prikhodi. Ia te...). In *Land of Oblivion*: 'Dad we are waiting for you in Slavutich' (Papa, my zhdem tebia v Slavutich).

20. While the heritage of Antiquity was crucial for the cultural development within the Latin speaking, Western culture (Scholasticism, Renaissance) it never became part of the heritage imported to Kievskaia Rus, when Prince Vladimir decided to adopt the Greek orthodox church from the Byzantine empire.

21. According to the prophecy of the monk Filofei in the 16th century, this heritage makes Russia the only righteous inheritor of the Byzantine Empire when Eastern Rome went to the grave in the 15th century.

22. The catastrophe at the Chernobyl power plant, 26 April, took place about one week before Orthodox Easter, which in 1986 was celebrated on 4 May.

23. Bryukhovetska refers this film to the genre of perestroika films, mainly because of the film's documentary approach (Bryukhovetska 2009). However, I also regard the carnival aesthetics of the film as an important reason for this categorization (see Bratova 2013).
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Notes on contributor

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