

Chapter 4:

The Zone as a Place of Repentance and Retreat

Chernobyl in Belarusian Films of the 1990s and 2000s

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1. Introduction

The military invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022 began with the takeover of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The news of the outbreak of war in the former Soviet Union triggered a culture shock, part of which was the instant renewed fear of a new nuclear disaster and radioactive contamination that was reflected in the media – both among the populations of Belarus and Ukraine, which were most affected by the 1986 Chernobyl reactor explosion, and in Europe. News outlets and social media advised people to stockpile iodine pills and take a large dose if the level of background radiation rose to protect the thyroid gland, and rumours and fears were shared that the pills had disappeared from pharmacies. The panicked reaction that quickly spread through the internet suggests that both the memory and fear of a repeat of the Chernobyl disaster, despite the mothballing of the exploded reactor and complete shutdown of the nuclear plant, have become part of global contemporary culture in the 21st century.

And part of this global culture is the constant production of films and television series (as well as computer games) on the topic. Documentaries as well as feature films about the events at Chernobyl, the consequences of the nuclear explosion and the search for its causes have been released in various countries over the years. Among the feature films to date, there is a large number of both problematic and dramatic auteur films and genre films where the Chernobyl zone becomes the backdrop for a horror, thriller or adventure action plot.

In comparison, Belarusian feature films on the Chernobyl topic constitute only a small proportion of this group of films – from 1990 to 2020, only six feature films were released by independent studios and Belarusfilm. At first glance, this seems paradoxical, as for the small republic the radioactive contamination of parts of its territories became a national disaster and trauma. Belarusians are still facing the consequences of the explosion, for example, Belarus has a very high percentage of thyroid diseases. Moreover, the most famous book about Chernobyl was written by Nobel laureate and Belarusian

writer Svetlana Alexievich [Svitlana Aleksievich] and *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (*Chernobyl'skaia molitva. Khronika budushchego*, 1997) has been the source of plots for many films produced outside Belarus, like the famous HBO series *Chernobyl* (2019). But Belarusian feature film directors have never turned to this book themselves.

In order to understand this seemingly paradoxical situation, in the following section I will analyse Belarusian films from the 1990s-2000s about Chernobyl taking into account the closely intertwined cinematographic and political contexts. I will then offer an analysis of four genre films from different periods – the crime drama *The Wolves in the Zone* (*Volki v zone*, 1990), the action film *The Atomic Zone Ranger* (*Reindzher iz atomnoi zony*, 1999), the melodrama *I Remember/Father's House* (*Ia pomniu/Otchii dom*, 2005) and the thriller *Exclusion Zone* (*Zapretnaia zona*, 2020). In doing so, I want to trace the different meanings applied to the event that took place on the night of 26 April 1986, what political processes these meanings manifest, and how they are influenced by the genre format of the respective films.

2. Production Conditions and Policies

In 1986, in the wake of perestroika, a landmark event took place in Soviet cinema – the Fifth USSR Congress of Cinematographers in Moscow. It was held in a both revolutionary and romantic atmosphere under the slogan “to put an end to serfdom in cinema.” At this convention a new leadership of the Union of Cinematographers was elected (Ėlem Klimov became the head), the abolition of censorship was declared, and the Union's republic cinema organisations proclaimed independence from the central USSR Goskino. A new film production model was established by the Council of Ministers' Regulation “On the Restructuring of Creative, Organisational, and Economic Activities in the Soviet Film Industry” in 1989, which in fact initiated a process of radical changes.

One of the results was the emergence of independent film studios, at least within the Belarusian film industry. A number of well-known Belarusian directors, mostly of the middle generation (like Viacheslav Nikiforov [Viacheslaŭ Nikifaraŭ], Valerii Rybarev [Valer Rybaraŭ] or Mikhail Ptshuk) left Belarusfilm, which until then had been the sole film studio, and established private film studios. By 1991, there were already eleven such studios, which is why “the period 1990–1992 is described by many as a boom of independent film production in Belarus” (Khatkovskaia 2010:108).

However, another result of the reforms was a crisis in the film industry, which was no longer financed from the Soviet budget: production declined, distribution problems were experienced, and the competition against Western films was lost, with these films often being imported by ‘pirates’, filling cinemas and video rental outlets, and being freely sold on videotape. After the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991, the situation became even more critical. Independent studios had to master the market economy and secure funding for their films. They mainly depended on bank loans and subsequently were held financially responsible.

This determined a lot of the specifics of the studio executives and their approach to what they did and how they did it. They had to calculate everything from the begin-

ning, stick to deadlines and budgets, combine the relative cheapness of the films' production whenever possible with their quality and appeal to the audience, and engage in marketing and self-promotion. They abandoned expensive projects, made low-budget films and experimented a lot. (Khatkovskaia 2010: 112–113)

At the same time, Belarusfilm remained the only production base in Belarus. However, its management did not consider it necessary to support 'independents' and charged very high rental prices. In addition, private film projects were heavily taxed and there were no tax breaks for Belarusian directors. In the light of high inflation, these conditions were very difficult. Yet in the early 1990s, it was the independent film studios that began to shape the face of Belarusian cinema.

These hard economic conditions explain why the films produced by the independent studios were mostly popular genre productions (like dramas, melodramas, comedies, detectives, action films) – directors had to ensure financial returns. However, experimental auteur films were also often private production projects. Thus, the first Belarusian feature film that was set in the Chernobyl region, the crime drama *The Wolves in the Zone* directed by Viktor Deriugin, was produced as an independent project. It was released in 1990 as a coproduction of two private film studios, the Belarusian Impul's, Minsk and the Russian Benefis, Leningrad. At the same time, the film can be interpreted as an authorial experiment, based on the search for a cinematic language to describe the Chernobyl disaster as a social and cultural trauma.

In total, several documentaries and only three feature films were made in the 1990s about life after Chernobyl, although the topic itself was still very present among the Belarusian public. Only one of the movies was produced by Belarusfilm: in 1993 it released the film *Black Stork* (*Chernyi aist*), the production of which was entrusted to the iconic Soviet Belarusian director Viktor Turov [Viktar Tyraŭ]. The film is characterised by its non-genre format, slow narration, symbolism and use of metaphor. The two other films are directed by Viacheslav Nikiforov, *My soul, Maria* (*Dusha moia, Mariia*, 1993) – a drama produced by the private studio Kadr, which had been led by Nikiforov since 1987. Nikiforov returned to the subject of Chernobyl once again with the action film *The Atomic Zone Ranger*. Released in 1999, it was a joint project of several Russian studios and was shot at Belarusfilm. Compared to *The Wolves in the Zone*, here the matrix of a Hollywood action film is adapted more explicitly and consistently, which gained the film a greater popularity.

But already by the mid-1990s, most of the Belarusian independent studios had disappeared from the cultural field.

The reasons for their self-liquidation are the lack of conditions conducive to their activities: an unformed legislative and legal framework, an unorganised banking system, credit and insurance systems, the absence of tax benefits and a policy of priorities for national cinema, and the absence of a coherent programme for the development of the national film industry itself. (Khatkovskaia 2010: 121)

In 1997, Belarusfilm was officially given 'national' status, and it returned to shooting films with state-funded money, just as in Soviet times.

In the absence of opportunities for the further existence of independent studios in the country, the situation slowly starts to return [...] to a situation of administrative regulation of cinema and state funding, to a limited and easily regulated number of subjects of cinematographic activity. (Khatkovskaia 2010: 121)

Thus, it is no wonder that the period from 1986 to the mid-1990s was the most fruitful for Belarusian cinema in terms of social self-reflection. A number of films dealt with ‘blank spots’ of Belarusian history or sought to make sense of the late and post-Soviet present. They revealed the memory of traumatic experiences of various historical events of the 20th century seen from a national perspective like the Belarusian anti-Bolshevik resistance of the 1920s, the life of Belarusian Jews and the pogroms against them, the forced collectivisation or the post-war Stalinist repressions. All four feature films about the Chernobyl disaster made during this period are embedded in this context.

However, by the early 2000s, the work of cinematography engaged with the topic of national, historical and cultural traumas was artificially stopped. In this decade only a few Belarusian feature and documentary films that touched upon the subject of the Chernobyl catastrophe were produced. In 2006, Belarusfilm released the ‘anniversary’ film-melodrama *I Remember/Father’s House*, directed by Sergei Sychev, which reflects on the state policy of memory and constructs a myth about the stable modern Belarus of the Lukashenko era. The main idea of this film is “You shouldn’t look into the past all the time [...],” as one of its positive characters explains.

In 2020, following the success of the HBO series *Chernobyl*, Belarusfilm released the action film *Exclusion Zone*, directed by Mitrii Semenov-Aleinikov, where the Chernobyl territory becomes a springboard for a survival game of warring teenage heroes on a hunt for a bag full of money. The Russian TV series *Chernobyl* (produced by the Russian TV channel NTV, released in 2021) was also filmed in Belarus. Its plot is revealing, especially in light of the fact that a year later Russia would launch a ‘special operation’ in Ukraine with the passive support of most Russian TV viewers: Here KGB officers learn that foreign agents are interested in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. An experienced CIA agent, suspected of espionage, is located in the town of Pripjat’ and to find him, a Soviet lieutenant colonel of military counterintelligence arrives in the town. Soviet history serves as a blueprint for the present.

3. *The Wolves in the Zone* (1990): Mission Impossible

Although *The Wolves in the Zone* has been and still is advertised as a crime thriller, the criminal plot here seems less important than the author’s statement with its surrealist climax and religious outcome of the storyline. Instead of a thriller, an existential drama of dehumanisation unfolds on the screen. The protagonist of the film is a former police captain called Rodion, who returns to the Chernobyl zone on a special mission. He was born there, was a liquidator in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, damaged his health and was forced to leave on his own and take his blinded mother with him. These details are revealed in a dialogue in the first scene with the local policeman Stas, as well as the fact that a gang of looters (‘wolves’) has appeared in the zone – led by their mutual ac-

quaintance Semën. Unlike the captain, who gained nothing from working for the state as a policeman, Semën lives richly and clearly bribes the local authorities so that he can sell goods taken from abandoned houses. This constellation is central for the whole plot contrasting the courageous Rodion with the neurotic Stas, who leads a cynical gang selling items contaminated with radiation all over the Soviet Union.¹

This criminal plot in the following scenes, however, gives way to direct social and political denunciation. In the first scene, where Rodion and the viewer are immersed in the life of the zone, he witnesses a policeman stopping a peasant ‘self-settler’ (*samosel*)², who is driving a cart from his territory. Under the hay he is hiding radioactive cherries which he is taking to the market to sell. When the policeman proposes that the bearded man taste cherries, he spits them out in fright. Rodion also observes the liquidators burying food and machinery contaminated by radiation in a quarry, covering them with earth. “Battalion of death”, says the liquidators’ exhausted foreman, “working without gloves, naked [...]” A close-up shows the face of a twelve-year-old boy sitting behind the wheel of an excavator without any protective equipment.

Subsequently, we see some foreigners loading a car into a van, clearly taking it away to be sold. The next scene reveals that it is a joint business between Semën and the Soviet district leadership. After the deal, a representative of the nomenklatura goes out into the square “to the people,” only after putting on boots with lead soles. “Quiet, comrades! Many authoritative scientists, authoritative commissions have come here. They’ve come to the conclusion: it’s still possible to live!” Shouts can be heard from the crowd, separated by the police: “And why are the children sick?!” A little boy asks, “Uncle, when are we all going to die?”

Figure 4.1: Film stills from the film *The Wolves in the Zone* (1990). *Radioactive products in the burial ground; Speech by district authorities to local residents*



- 1 As the credits state, this film was actually even shot in an abandoned area of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and occasional documentaries are used and simulated to convey the atmosphere of the half-empty and radiation-contaminated area.
- 2 ‘Self-settlers’ were locals who had voluntarily returned from evacuation to their homes in the radiation-contaminated area and were living in abandoned villages.

The three scenes are constructed using parallel editing, even though the story is told as taking place consecutively. This means that the director sees a connection between them, as well as a key to understanding the post-Chernobyl Soviet reality, which he paints as disintegrated and dehumanised.

Such a conclusion is also supported by a subsequent scene at the local market in a town near the border with the zone, where everything from food to white goods is sold. One resident walks around with a dosimeter, which shows high doses everywhere. “Put that gun away! Get out of here, you hooligan! Alcoholic!” a peasant yells at him who is bringing his radioactive cherries to the market. The curious citizen is grabbed and taken away by the ‘market watcher’ mafia, who works for Semën. Rodion stands up for him and is brutally beaten in an abandoned hangar. Semën, who fears the former captain will expose his business, warns: “If you get into trouble, you’ll be buried yourself [...]” Rodion, beaten half to death, soon recovers – and this is perhaps the only sign that the viewer is facing a true hero of the criminal genre; in other scenes, the former captain is more often a silent witness rather than an active participant.

Obviously, these images of brutal mafia, corrupt police, cynical representatives of state power, who are opposed by a lone hero, are adapted from Hollywood action movies, which were well known to Soviet viewers and video parlour-goers from popular films in the late USSR with Sylvester Stallone (*Rambo. First Blood*, 1982), Steven Seagal (*Above the Law*, 1988), or Chuck Norris (*Code of Silence*, 1985). However, the emergence of these characters is also due to the social developments of the perestroika period. The criminal world as part of the ‘decaying’ Soviet reality had appeared in films since 1986, such as *Plumbum, or The Dangerous Game* (*Pliumbum, ili Opasnaia igra*, 1986), directed by Valerii Abdrashitov, *Assa* (1987), directed by Sergei Solov’ev, *The Needle* (*Igla*, 1988), directed by Rashid Nugmanov [Rachid Nougmanov] or *My Name is Harlequin* (*Menia zovut Arlekino*, 1988), directed by Valerii Rybarev. Late Soviet daily life is represented here as false, implacably class-oriented, divided into rich and poor, province and the Moscow centre. Especially the common Soviet man is shown as drinking heavily, often a conformist and a latent Stalinist. Also, in *The Wolves in the Zone*, the ordinary Soviet facing the collapse of his country is portrayed as a looter or a cynical salesman of contaminated food, thinking only about his own well-being. The parallel motif of all these perestroika films is the violence that pervades Soviet society, as well as the cynicism of state power.

Very characteristic for this trend are two Belarusian films of this period – *Our Armoured Train* (*Nash bronepoezd*, 1988, Belarusfilm) and *Political Bureau Co-op or A Long Farewell* (*Kooperativ Politbiuro, ili Budet dolgim proshchanie*, 1992, Independent Studio), directed by Mikhail Ptashuk and written by Evgenii Grigor’ev. The latter was shot using private funds as an independent project already in 1990, but was released only two years later after the collapse of the USSR, when it finally received a distribution certificate from the Belarusian Ministry of Culture. *Political Bureau Co-op* begins as a satire of late-Soviet society: in the story, a resourceful entrepreneur creates a cooperative and hires doppelgängers of the civil war hero Chapaev as well as of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The theatre troupe travels to Belarusian towns where it draws full houses. The spectators of the play laugh at Khrushchev and Brezhnev, and then suddenly frantically applaud Stalin’s appearance on the provincial stage. Satire is gradually replaced by tragedy. The turning point comes in the scene where two representatives of the provin-

cial government order a Stalin impersonator into their mansion. He tries to play his role 'to order', but the situation changes: the owners begin to humiliate and mock the elderly actor and then they forbid the troupe from continuing their performances.

This turning point of the plot reveals the critical message of the film: encountering the Soviet authorities leads to inevitable humiliation, to discovering oneself as a subordinate, being at the bottom of the power hierarchy. However, the film protagonists also encounter the new 'masters of life', who turn out to be even more dangerous and frightening than the old ones. They are young racketeers who show up at the village hut and blackmail the outcast troupe into paying them protection money. On discovering that they have no money, they shoot all the actors, brutally torturing each one, before setting fire to a hut with the bodies of those killed. The gruesome finale of the burning village house, in which almost all the main characters die, reveals, according to the director, a symbolic meaning that characterises the whole country.

Thus, this film very vividly deals with the internal conflicts of late Soviet society and its fear of a post-Soviet future. The past is represented here by the figures of the leaders, the present by the 'Stalinist people' and the corrupted power, and the future by the young racketeers, the killers, who represent the dangerous nature of wild capitalism.

Figure 4.2: Film stills from the film *Political Bureau Co-op or A Long Farewell*. Aleksei Petrenko as Stalin's doppelgänger actor



The Wolves in the Zone contains a very similar negative message that connects it to the theme of life after the Chernobyl disaster. Whereas in typical Hollywood crime thrillers or action films of the same period the protagonist is supposed to restore order and punish evil in a world that is falling apart, this exact mission proves impossible in late Soviet and early post-Soviet films. Just as the protagonist is defeated, the genre logic is also suspended here.

4. Symptoms of Cultural Trauma

In place of the typical climax of crime genre movies with a shoot-out between the hero and the antagonists, the central part in *The Wolves in the Zone* is a long and fraught se-

quence at night in a deserted town that has been cleared of residents. Rodion and Stas decide that it is impossible to deal with the gang through legal means, so they kidnap Semën from his cottage and take him to a place where no authority exists. We see documentary footage filmed at night of an abandoned town (most likely Pripiat' within the Chernobyl area, where all the inhabitants have been evacuated). This is followed by a scene in an abandoned flat after the evacuation, where the militia friends bring Semën as well as Stas's girlfriend, a nurse, whom they suspect of reselling looted items. In the meantime, Rodion goes off to look for his house. Spotting a marauder there trying to steal the family icon, he shoots him. It is at the house that Stas finally finds him. Rodion orders him to take the corpse out of his house and yells at his partner to leave as well. Then he looks at the photo album thrown on the floor. A close-up shows a photograph of Rodion as a child standing under a portrait of Stalin with a toy gun in his hands – a typical Soviet boy socialised with violence from early on.

The main emotional state of all those involved in the final part of the film can be described as fear, hysteria and madness. Also, all the characters who find themselves in the zone have nothing more to lose and nothing to hide; in the plot they are extremely open. In fact, the viewer hears a series of public monologues, which are constructed as a social denunciation and an exposé of the essence of the Soviet man. For example, Semën and a nurse are drinking vodka found in the flat. She complains about her very low salary and her longing for a child and justifies her collaboration with the looters entirely due to the circumstances of life: "Life is divided into before and after," says the woman. "We don't know what we eat, what we drink, what we breathe, what will happen to us. We are hostages. How can we keep ourselves safe? And there is no point." Semën's monologue is an ode to wild capitalism, denouncing the lack of initiative and the slavish obedience of the Soviet people. Rodion suddenly turns out to be a patriot for whom his homeland, the Soviet Union, is important. Stas's monologue is constructed as the self-disclosure of an ordinary Soviet man, as he shouts, "We are mutants, slaves, sheep!"

Then another man – a former intellectual, a former nuclear power plant worker – breaks into the flat. He claims to be the owner of the flat and suspects the guests of being looters, and they suspect him of the same. Rodion and Stas shoot both him and Semën, and are ready to shoot each other. It is dawn. Finally, Rodion imagines that the door of the room is slowly opening and a huge cactus, oversized due to the radiation, is reaching for him.

Thus, the viewer is immersed in a process of dehumanisation, where all the characters lose any sense of direction, easily kill each other and sink into madness. The zone is painted as a place where there is not only no power restraining people, but also no morality, and this is, according to the movie, the essence of what the Chernobyl disaster and the Soviet regime have done to people. This understanding is also supported by other individual fragments of the film and the glimpses of Rodion's flashbacks, such as in the picture showing him with a Stalin portrait. In this sense, he also represents the last post-war generation, being born still under Stalin's regime and in the present turning out to be criminal, deceitful and cynical. This is also true for the representatives of the district authorities, who began their ascent through the Komsomol and the Party. One of these nomenklatura representatives outright lies in a speech to the local population demonstrating no respect to ordinary Soviet people or to human life in general. In one of

the flashbacks, Rodion recalls the evacuation of the population from the contaminated territories and thereby refers to the German occupation as one of the most terrible and tragic events in the memory of the Belarusians. The present authorities seem to be no better.

Figure 4.3: Film stills from the film *The Wolves in the Zone*. Rodion and his memories of the evacuation



Although these motifs are exaggerated and taken as a direct denunciation of perestroika-era cinema in general and the author's film concept, some of them are also heard in the testimonies recorded by Svetlana Alexievich for her documentary-fiction book *Chernobyl Prayer*. In the accounts of survivors – former liquidators or their relatives – parallels with the horrors and losses of war are often mentioned. For example, in the chapter “Land of the Dead” there is a story about the ‘self-settlers’, an elderly couple of peasants who went into the forest with their cow when the soldiers evacuated the village. “Like under the punishers,” they explain. Other characters in the book also recall returning to their homes along familiar ‘partisan paths’.

There are also witness accounts of looting and of locals removing both radioactive items and crops to sell in the markets. A former policeman recalls:

They brought meat for disposal in the burial sites. The hips were missing from the beef carcasses. The fillet. I filed a report. We had a tip-off that a house in an abandoned village was being dismantled. They were numbering and placing the logs on to a tractor with a trailer. We headed straight out to the address given. The raiders were arrested. They were hoping to remove the building and sell it as a dacha. They'd already received advance payment from the future owners. I filed a report. (Alexievich 2016: 88)

A recurring motif in *Chernobyl Prayer* is that the authorities explained nothing to the local population or the liquidators, gave no medical advice, acted in a domineering manner, hiding both the truth and their confusion, while the newspapers carried the traditional Soviet heroic narrative. In the part “The Soldier's Choir,” the surviving liquidator soldiers recall the disenfranchised and hysterical atmosphere (“One guy, I think he was from Leningrad, was protesting: ‘I don't want to die.’ They threatened him with a court martial.” (Alexievich 2016: 76) and how they were sent to the area with only shovels (“Did

all the work by spade.” (Alexievich 2016: 76)). At the same time, instances of heroism are also recalled when liquidators consciously sacrificed their lives.

Today we can view these monologues as evidence of the cultural trauma experienced by late Soviet society. As the central figure of “Monologue on a moonscape” reflected:

I began wondering why so little has been written about Chernobyl. Our writers keep on writing about the war, about Stalin’s camps, but they’re silent on Chernobyl. There are almost no books on it. Do you think that’s just a coincidence? It’s an episode still outside our culture. Too traumatic for our culture. And our only answer is silence. We just close our eyes, like little children, and think we can hide (Alexievich 2016: 98).

The Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2001a; 2001b) suggests that any changes or events that shock society should be considered social trauma. In contrast to the medical or psychological understanding of the term, it refers to a “destructive impact on the social body.” If trauma affects the cultural order, it can be called “cultural trauma,” a symptom of which is the “disruption of normality:” a crisis of collective identity and a “disruption of the world of meanings,” where both values and trust in authority are permanently undermined.

If disorder occurs, symbols take on meanings different from the ordinary signifiers. Values lose value, unrealistic goals are demanded, norms prescribe unsuitable behaviour, gestures and words signify something other than their former meanings. Beliefs are rejected, faith is undermined, trust disappears, charisma collapses and idols crumble (Sztompka 2001a: 11).

In the final scene of *The Wolves in the Zone*, Rodion races away in a military car, which he has stolen to get away from the site of the crime, having been shot by a distraught Stas. He then finds himself in the dugout of a strange man who all this time has been silently observing everything that has been going on in the zone and in the flat. In the corner of the dugout there is a candle and an icon:

- “Who are you?” Rodion asks him half-dead.
- “A Human. The zone,” he replies.

And the viewer sees the man sowing the desolate land. It is commented on by a voice-over: “If a baby is taken away from its mother’s breast, it will be sick. So it is with the man from whom God has been taken away.”

This final moral can be seen in different contexts. On the one hand, it refers to the central idea of Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze’s film *Repentance* (*Pokaianie/Monanieba*), which was filmed in 1984 but was not shown to a wide audience until after the Fifth Congress of Cinematographers in 1987. In its symbolic form it spoke about the victims of Stalinist repressions and the fact that they should not be forgotten either by the new generations of the Soviet authorities or by the people. The protagonist Ketevan, after the funeral of Varlam Aravidze (a symbolic figure who refers to both Stalin and Beria), digs up his corpse several times and throws it at the house of his wealthy heirs, son and grandson, and then tells the story of how Varlam destroyed their family by arresting his father and mother on a deliberately false accusation. The final scene of *Repentance* features a dialogue that has become famous and iconic primarily in the eyes of the late Soviet intelligentsia. An elderly woman asks Ketevan if this road will lead her to the temple: “– This

street of Varlam, it will not lead to the temple. – Then what's the use of it? What's the road for if it doesn't lead to the temple?" asks the old woman and walks off into the distance. After the release of this film, the idea of repentance for the whole of Soviet society became, in a way, the project of the Soviet intelligentsia and was often called for in public statements. Behind this idea, presented in religious tones, was the hope for the 'spiritual renewal' of Soviet society and its morals.

At the same time, the final scene of *The Wolves in the Zone* captures the collapse of faith in Soviet science and the 'peaceful atom', which was its main symbol in the 1970s (the Chernobyl nuclear power plant was completed and started operating in 1977). Similar motifs are recorded in Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*: one of the characters retells the popular version that the Chernobyl disaster was prophesied in the Book of Revelation:

'And there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter'. (Alexievich 2016: 74)

Chernobyl in Ukrainian is translated as "wild plant, wormwood," this is why the apocalyptic "wormwood star" has become a stable metaphor of the catastrophe in the journalism of the perestroika period and 1990s as well as in popular opinion. "You want to take her for science, but I loathe your science! Loathe it! First, your science took him away from me, now it's back for more. I won't give her to you!" (Alexievich 2016: 21) says another figure in the book whose monologue is a very painful story about how her husband died in agony (she recalls the doctors saying that he is now "a highly contaminated radioactive object" (Alexievich 2016: 16) and that she should take care of herself and her child, not to stay in hospital with him dying).

As Sztompka writes, any attempts to interpret a shock event that becomes symptomatic of cultural trauma do not arise in a vacuum: "There is always an available set of meanings encoded in the culture of a particular community (society). Individuals do not invent meanings, but select them from the surrounding culture, applying them to potentially traumatic events [...]" (2001a: 8). He also notes that these interpretations often manifest pre-existing cultural conflicts which, in my view, could include social stratification, the ritualisation of ideology, and grassroots condemnation of continued militarisation (like the 1979 invasion of Soviet troops into Afghanistan). These conflicts permeated the whole of the previous Brezhnev period (the period of Stagnation) and surely formed the increasingly indifferent, ironic or negative attitude towards Soviet power.

In summary, the crime movie *The Wolves in the Zone* and several other films from the perestroika period like *Political Bureau Co-op* deal with this cultural trauma, attempting to capture it on screen. In comparison, *The Atomic Zone Ranger*, another genre film made as an independent project but nearly ten years later, reflects very different cultural patterns and socio-political symptoms.

5. *The Atomic Zone Ranger* (1999). A Fantasy of a ‘Strong Arm’

By the mid-1990s, the crime-adventure thriller, set against the backdrop of post-Soviet everyday life, was becoming a popular genre both in post-Soviet literature and in cinema, including Belarusfilm. *The Atomic Zone Ranger* was released in this context. Aleksei Kravchenko, a Russian actor who played the famous role of teenager Flora in Èlem Klimov’s war drama about the German occupation, *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*, 1985), was invited to play the main character. Yet it was only after the release of *The Atomic Zone Ranger* that he changed his image and became the ‘Russian Chuck Norris’.

Figure 4.4: Film still of Aleksei Kravchenko in *Come and See* (left)



Figure 4.5: Film still of Aleksei Kravchenko in *The Atomic Zone Ranger* (right)



In the film, Kravchenko plays a captain nicknamed Badger, who served on a nuclear submarine and later returns to Belarus to replace his father as a forester. He has to prevent timber from being exported from the Chernobyl zone for sale, and also runs into the local mafia, which is involved in drug trafficking and uses abandoned houses as a drug depot.

The main difference between the *The Wolves in the Zone* and a typical action film is that the latter usually promotes an incorruptible and strong hero who confronts the criminal world. This is commonly accompanied by a melodramatic love story, erotic episodes, a climax in the form of a shoot-out with the mafia and a happy ending. Accordingly, the grafting of the Hollywood genre canon onto post-Soviet soil requires a well-crafted and recognizable everyday background and a sympathetic protagonist that the public can identify with – fighting against antiheroes in a painful and unstable world. *The Wolves in the Zone* adapt many of these motifs, showing ‘self-settlers’ and looters in the zone or traders who sell radioactive goods on the market throughout the Soviet Union. Following the release of a series of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian films about Chernobyl and the publication of Alexievich’s *Chernobyl Prayer*, these motifs became common patterns of description of the social consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. “We got a nuclear missile from ourselves. Now we’ll be dealing with it for 300 years,” the protagonist Ranger

and his only associate in the fight against organised crime argue in one of their private conversations over a beer.

In addition to the motifs of lawlessness in the zone, realistic details of ordinary people's bleak, dreary everyday lives are shown, typical for 1990s perestroika films. The action film also portrays life in the provinces bordering the Chernobyl zone as poor and depressing. But there is no social and political criticism here anymore – the main trouble is not an indifferent or cynical state, but the mafia, the so-called 'New Russians' or 'New Belarusians'. Unlike the state, the mafia can be defeated – destroyed or imprisoned, and the evil will be punished. In this way, the genre formula of the crime thriller neutralises both social tension and fear of the future. *The Atomic Zone Ranger*, like other genre films of the period, adopts these motifs reproducing the post-Soviet audiences' fatigue from the shocking and demanding auteur cinema of the earlier perestroika period. As Russian film scholar Ian Levchenko aptly put it, "the Soviet cinema of the late 1980s [...] is ahead of its viewer, it wants too much from him. The need for a serious conversation in this viewer is more likely to arise out of inertia, on the wave of interest in the media. Unsupported by existential need, this interest fades quickly" (Levchenko 2007: 701).

This viewer fatigue regarding social and political criticism and self-criticism, as well as cultural products dealing with cultural trauma and fear is characteristic for the 1990s. Instead of thought-provoking pictures, genre cinema offered a schematic struggle of the strong hero against the mafia, which may be compared with the political call for a 'strong hand' of the authorities. In 1999, for example, Vladimir Putin declared publicly on central television with regard to Chechen fighters and justifying the Russian bombing of Grozny: "We'll rub [mochit'] them out in the outhouse". The expression 'rub them out in the outhouse' instantly became an idiom, and permanently formed the image of the new Russian president as a strong leader. At the same time, in the second half of the 1990s, in independent Belarus, Lukashenko [Lukashenka] won wide popular support and was given the respectful family nickname of "Batska".

6. The 2000s: "You don't have to look back all the time..."

As one of the epigraphs to her *Chernobyl Prayer*, Alexievich chooses fragments from the article of the handbook *Chernobyl: A look back over the decades*, published in 1996, ten years after the disaster:

On 26 April 1986, at 1:23 hours 58 seconds, a series of blasts brought down Reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, near the Belarusian border. The accident at Chernobyl was the gravest technological catastrophe of the twentieth century.

For the small country of Belarus (population ten million), it was a national disaster, despite the country not having one nuclear power station of its own. Belarus is still an agrarian land, with a predominantly rural population. During the Second World War, the Germans wiped out 619 villages on its territory along with their inhabitants. In the aftermath of Chernobyl, the country lost 485 villages and towns: seventy remain buried

forever beneath the earth. During the war, one in four Belarusians was killed; today, one in five lives in the contaminated zone. (Alexievich 2016: 1)

Twenty years later, Belarusfilm released the melodrama *I Remember/Father's House*. The main message is encapsulated in the description of one of the positive characters, a doctor-professor who monitors the health of the artist Anatolii, who as a child lived on contaminated territory and lost his parents and brother: "You shouldn't look back all the time, to the past. I understand, the people you loved are there, Chernobyl is there. But don't burn yourself to the ground! You're not a memorial candle." These words resound from the very first minutes of the film, which brings us to the key phenomenon of Belarusian state cinema of the 2000s: ideology is not camouflaged here, rather it is brought to the surface. It is articulated by the positive characters, supported by the plot, visuals and the final message – and none of it needs to be deciphered.

The professor's daughter Inna is Anatolii's former lover, who leaves him when she finds out she is pregnant and he is afraid to have a baby. In the end she leaves her job as curator of an art gallery and follows Anatolii to his homeland – to wait for the arrival of the baby in an abandoned village on the territory of the zone. The self-settled peasants have been living there for a long time. Sturdy, ruddy old men build a chapel in the zone to appease God, as one man says, "Chernobyl is a punishment for us for turning away from God," stating, "The soul is beyond control of radiation" and claiming that "nature itself has purified itself." Accordingly, Anatolii feels healthy and happy here, breathes the clean air of his native village and is reborn to a new life. It turns out that his illness was purely a product of nervous self-destruction.

Within this frame, the plot of the film is driven by a hardly camouflaged conflict. Anatolii discovers that cynical workers laid the floor of the house of the old Makarovs with radioactive planks taken out of storage from the zone. "That's a sin," says Anatolii's aunt. The narrator answers her: "Punishment. Let Comrade Makarov now walk on his floor and glow!" However, Anatolii sets out to find the house to warn the owner, but discovers that a young girl, Katia, who recently bought it, lives there. She tells him that the house has been sold because of the sudden death of Makarov, who used to live there with his grandparents. A further plot aspect develops as they attempt to find the cynical construction worker and punish him. At the end, a young businessman in love with Katia finds him through his connections and turns him in to the police.

The Belarusians portrayed in this film are mostly kind, naive and well-to-do people. They represent social stereotypes that have nothing to do with Belarusian reality. Thus, self-settled peasants are shown here as the most important national social group, 'stalwart in spirit' and religious, who have returned to the zone after evacuation and are convinced there is no longer any radiation. When Anatolii also decides to stay in his native village and to help paint the chapel, one of the old men says: "You should paint icons of us, so that our grandchildren will come here and pray". According to programmatic statements in the film, all problems are caused by 'spiritual mutation'. A bundle of dollars that passes from one character to another in order to help each other until it reaches Katia symbolises the solidarity that still exists among ordinary people.

In contrast to the early Christian idea of repentance, which appears in the finale of the 1990 film drama *The Wolves in the Zone*, here the religious morality refers to the Or-

thodox Church. It is also combined with traditional patriarchal relations in a romantic light: women treat men with love and sacrifice, Anatolii's bride Inna is ready to carry a child in the zone, and Katia keeps her chastity until her wedding – only towards the end she finally agrees to marry the businessman and tells him: “You will both feed and clothe me.” References to orthodoxy, patriarchy and popular ‘spirituality’ are fragments of the eclectic ideology of the Lukashenko era. Its essence can be defined as the ideal of a pre-political stage of society, where the life of citizens is an adjustment to its urgent problems. As the film *I Remember/Father's House* suggests, the state is as if invisible here, as instead of by force, ideological constructs are presented here as ‘coming from the people themselves’ and thus guaranteeing an imagined ‘Belarusian stability’.

Repressive mechanisms are shown here only in relation to ‘outsiders’ who allegedly act against the interests of the ‘common people’ and their well-being. This notion of Belarusian authoritarianism allows the state to demand unconditional acceptance of any of its decisions. This became particularly obvious in 2008, when Lukashenko made the final decision to build a nuclear power plant on the territory of Belarus. The main objection from opponents to its construction was the fear of a repeat of the Chernobyl disaster. But other arguments like the ecological damage caused by transportation and processing of uranium and the problem of nuclear waste storage were also raised. “No atom is peaceful!”, was one of the of the often-repeated slogans used by activists at the annual Charnobylski Shliakh protest action first held on 26 April 1989. Later in independent Belarus these marches and rallies in memory of Chernobyl became a form of political resistance and the one in 2008 was the biggest ever in the country, protesting against Lukashenko's policies, accompanied by clashes with police and arrests. This mass resistance against the construction of the nuclear power plant showed vividly that the authoritarian claim of an overall consent among ‘common people’ was false and that the distrust of citizens towards the authorities is enormous, especially because the Belarusian state never discusses its decisions with the public, does not engage in dialogue and responds to any protests with repressive methods.

The Belarusian revolution that erupted in August 2020, following the rigging of the presidential election results, the arrest of candidates, and the beatings and torture of protesters, finally exposed the mechanisms of violence that have always underpinned Lukashenko's rule. *I Remember/Father's House* is significant in this context and points to the model of relations between the state and the imagined people that the authorities are still trying to follow today, while no longer hiding their repressive nature and constantly pointing to internal and external ‘outsiders’ who threaten ‘stability’ and the ‘Belarusian model’. It is worth noting that the inauguration of the first unit of the Astravets nuclear power plant, the construction of which began in 2008, took place on 7 November 2020 with the participation of Lukashenko, by then already an illegitimate president. Interestingly, the event was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, formally demonstrating the continuity of the Belarusian authorities with the Soviet authorities.

7. A Thriller Set against the Backdrop of Perestroika

Exclusion Zone is the last Belarusian feature film shot to date that takes place in the Chernobyl zone. It was shot at Belarusfilm, co-financed by the film studio with independent producers and released in Russia and Belarus in theatres and on streaming platforms. The aim of the project was to make an entertaining genre film that would be profitable, which has been a problem and a challenge for the national film studio for many years, as many of its films are still made for educational purposes, are not popular among Belarusians and do not pay off at the box office.

The result is a thriller with elements of slasher, horror film and survival drama. It takes place in 1989, three years after the Chernobyl accident and two years before the collapse of the USSR. The main characters – former classmates, two girls and four boys – set out on a hike along the Pripiat' River, and overnight their raft floats into the Chernobyl zone (the film was not shot there). The wild, desolate forest, swamps and abandoned houses become a disturbing backdrop for the unfolding plot conflict, in which only one heroine can survive and return home. A bag full of stolen money falls into the hands of the characters, when one of the classmates, Lěsha, accidentally kills a man walking in the wood. The prospect of getting rich instantly changes the characters. They are all distinguished by several traits with an attempt at social typification. Lěsha is back from the war in Afghanistan – to explain his easy-going attitude towards murder and corpses, the authors add another old criminal case and poorly controlled jealousy towards one of the heroines. If his first victim is accidental, the shooting of a former classmate Grisha is done on purpose. Grisha is a conventional rock music lover, who does not want to share the money nor conceal the accidental murder. The film also mentions that one of the girls was working 'on a panel', i.e., worked as a prostitute, which explains her passion for easy money. And the fun-loving guy Monia wants the money on his own to buy a flat, a car and to get married.

Among these protagonists there is also a boy and a girl who take their share of the money with a noble purpose: Artur is the son of an academic and needs the money for a heart operation abroad for his younger brother, whereas Lida, a student who wants to help him, gives him her share. Then an unknown person comes into play, who turns out to be the partner of the accidentally killed man and who avenges him by killing two more of the classmates. In the final scene, Lida has to shoot the finally enraged 'Afghan' Lěsha to prevent him from killing her friend Artur. In this way, the film obviously follows a formulaic model and keeps the viewer curious as to who will kill the next victim and satisfy the viewers' expectations. It is also likely that associations with computer shooter games like *S. T. A. L. K. E. R. Shadow of Chernobyl*' (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Ten' Chernobyliya*, 2007) are intended, as the action is also placed in the 'zone'.

However, the real historical context of the late Soviet Union, although shown in a stereotyped way, as well as symbolic motifs are also characteristic for *Exclusion Zone*. For instance, the bag of money alludes to *I Remember/Father's House*, where a bundle of dollars also played a role, but back then the positive characters managed their problems without it. In contrast, closer to the finale, the survivors Artur and Lida learn that the money is radioactive, with the dosimeter from it going off the scale. "This is death. It must be destroyed," says Artur. But he has no time to destroy it, as he is killed in an absurd way

on his way out of the forest, caught in a bear trap. Lida leaves the zone in a motorboat, along with the deadly radioactive money. The epilogue shows her spreading the money among Soviet citizens, and then someone handing Artur's mother a box of dollars for the treatment of her second son abroad.

Another typical characteristic of the movie is a certain nostalgia for Soviet values and relics, which is also obvious in the motif of illicit and contagious money, which causes lust for profit and leads only to death, evoking the myth of the special morality of Soviet men. In another episode, the three heroes wander around the abandoned houses of Pripjat', where Monia throws stones and smashes windows, as he has "always dreamed of doing that." Then the glance of the protagonists stops at a red banner with the inscription: "Everything must be beautiful in a man: both his face and his soul, his clothes and his thoughts". In reality, such a slogan never existed, because Soviet banners bore short mobilisation formulas like "Peace for the World", "Peace. Labor. May" or "Decisions of the XXV congress of the CPSU Central Committee into life!". However, this quote about the beauty of a man from Anton Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya* (*Diadia Vania*, 1898) was not unknown in Soviet culture and, for instance, a frequent topic of school essays.

Figure 4.6: Filmstill from the film *Exclusion Zone*. A banner that is impossible in reality



Instead of seeing this set-piece as a historical mistake by the filmmakers, it is rather a symptom of how Soviet ideals are represented here, ideals, which the protagonists are apparently deprived of, having lost their moral compass during the perestroika period. A more realistic banner would have been inappropriate and incomprehensible to the post-Soviet public. Whereas Alexievich's generation distinguished itself in opposition to Soviet morality, as she portrayed it in her book *Secondhand Time* (*Vremia sekond khënd*, 2013), under the onslaught of capitalist cynicism, paradoxically the next, already post-Soviet generation is open for a certain nostalgia for the Soviet 'golden age', as it is summarized in a popular internet joke: 'the younger the blogger, the better the life he had under Stalin'.

Another characteristic of contemporary Belarusian films is the popular post-Soviet myth of the 'bandit 1990s'. Although the action in *Exclusion Zone* takes place before the collapse of the USSR, the motif of easy, bloody and bandit money is also omnipresent here. This myth is also actively used today in Russian and Belarusian propaganda. For

example, after the 2020 revolution, Lukashenko has repeatedly frightened Belarusians in speeches that ‘cynical businessmen’ (aka ‘bourgeoisie’) who disagree with his policies want everyone to return to the 1990s, a time when they got rich and the main population starved and suffered. According to the official authoritarian narrative, Lukashenko personally prevented the country from being ‘plundered’ by destroying the bandits and keeping the collective farms and state factories. Thus, an analysis of this thriller through the prism of the political context and popular post-Soviet myths reveals a rather conservative and nostalgic morality, that is rather implicitly visible on the level of the ‘political unconscious’ than purposefully on the level of the entertaining plot.

In summary, one can conclude, that in order to fully understand the specific adaptation of formulaic popular genre cinema within post-Soviet culture, a detailed elaboration of the real context and psychology of the characters is inevitable, paying special attention to the way nodal symbols are implemented into the film plot. Thereby, the four Belarusian genre films about the Chernobyl disaster from different historical periods analysed in this essay, show a clear development from more critical attitudes towards the Soviet legacy to a rather distorting view on the recent past. Especially today, against the background of the renaissance of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies in Russia and Belarus, it is most relevant to analyse late Soviet and post-Soviet movies through the prism of cultural trauma, taking into consideration ideology and political context.

When discussing the forms of social adaptation to cultural trauma, Sztompka, referring to Robert K. Merton’s research, distinguishes between constructive active and passive adaptations. The former forms include *innovation* (cultural production) and *rebellion* (an attempt to radically change culture). The passive forms are *ritualism*, cultivating “unestablished traditions” as a way of hiding from trauma, and *retreatism*, ignoring trauma and attempting to act as if it does not exist (2001b: 9). Regarding Belarusian cinema, the situation of the 1990s can generally be characterised as an attempt at innovative cultural production and rebellion, while the path chosen by the state and, accordingly, by Belarusian film in the 2000s rather resembles passive forms of retreatism. The critical message of films from the perestroika period and the early 1990s consisted in exposing totalitarian tendencies in power and in Soviet people. In spite of its journalistic, partly denunciatory form, the films of this period also expose the fear of impending capitalism and diagnose a value deadlock, trying to seriously cope with the near and distant past. Belarusian films of the following periods, with the exception of some independent productions, make an artificial break with this tendency, and instead present a both tendentiously ideological picture of reality, like in *I Remember/Father’s House*, and politically unconscious genre plots as in *Exclusion Zone*.

List of Games

S. T. A. L. K. E. R. *Shadow of Chernobyl!* (S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Ten’ Chernobylia), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2007.

Filmography

- Above the Law*, dir. Andrew Davis, USA 1988.
- Assa*, dir. Sergei Solov'ëv, USSR 1987.
- Black Stork (Chernyi aist)*, dir. Viktor Turov, Russia 1993.
- Chernobyl*, dir. Johan Renck, USA, UK 2019.
- Code of Silence*, dir. Andrew Davis, USA 1985.
- Come and See (Idi i smotri)*, dir. Èlem Klimov, USSR 1985.
- Exclusion Zone (Zapretnaia zona)*, dir. Mitrii Semenov-Aleinikov, Belarus 2020.
- I Remember/Father's House (Ia pomniu/Otchii dom)*, dir. Sergei Sychev, Belarus 2005.
- My Name is Harlequin (Menia zovut Arlekino)*, dir. Valerii Rybarev, USSR 1988.
- My Soul, Mariia (Dusha moia, Mariia)*, dir. Viacheslav Nikiforov, Belarus 1993.
- Our Armoured Train (Nash bronepoezd)*, dir. Mikhail Ptashuk, USSR 1988.
- Plumbum, or The Dangerous Game (Pliumbum, ili Opasnaia igra)*, dir. Valerii Abdrashitov, USSR 1986.
- Political Bureau Co-op or A Long Farewell (Kooperativ Politbiuro, ili Budet dolgim proshchanie)*, dir. Mikhail Ptashuk, Belarus 1992.
- Rambo. First Blood*, dir. Ted Kotcheff, USA 1982.
- Repentance (Pokaianie/Monanieba)*, dir. Tengiz Abuladze, Georgia 1984.
- The Atomic Zone Ranger (Reindzher iz atomnoi zony)*, dir. Viacheslav Nikiforov, Belarus, Russia 1999.
- The Needle (Igla)*, dir. Rashid Nugmanov [Rachid Nougmanov], USSR 1988.
- The Wolves in the Zone (Volki v zone)*, dir. Viktor Deriugin, USSR 1990.

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