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APPROACHING THE SUBLIME IN *CHERNOBYL* (2019)

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On the 6th of August, 1945, the city of Hiroshima ceased to exist; on the 9th, Nagasaki met the same fate. In the span of a few seconds they were vaporized by an explosion that left in its wake an enormous and eerie mushroom-shaped cloud. As Deudney reminds us, these two events marked the end of one of the most devastating wars in history, and the beginning of a new era, in which superpowers could easily destroy one another with the use of their nuclear arsenals. During the Cold War, the concept was appropriately called MAD, i.e. Mutual Assured Destruction (Deudney 32-33). This meant that conflicts could be resolved not by sending thousands of soldiers to their deaths and preparing detailed plans of invasions, but, instead, with one submarine, one bomber plane, or one missile. The hypothetical global conflict would be over in a few seconds. The power of the atomic bomb made the world seem suddenly fragile and unstable.

Significantly, the results went beyond the inventors' expectations: what they had created escaped their own comprehension and complicated their emotional response. From an aesthetic point of view, the sight was remarkable. J. Robert Oppenheimer famously quoted the Hindu scriptures to describe what he felt after witnessing the detonation: "I am become Death, destroyer of worlds" (in Rhodes 672).

Physical manifestations of nuclear power are among the most striking examples of the sublime in man-made objects. The perplexing nature of this

force has drawn the attention of researchers, writers, and filmmakers. As I claim in this article, one of the recent examples is the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019), written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, outlining the April 26, 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Due to the critical flaw in the design of the RBMK reactor and the operators' mismanagement of it, Reactor Number Four exploded. The radioactive material released from the facility contaminated the area near Chernobyl and Pripyat, after which the smoke cloud created in the explosion spread the radiation across the continent (Higginbotham 2019b: ch. 10). Undoubtedly, in its various ramifications, it was a disaster on a global scale (Belarus, Ministry for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Belarus 6). While the Chernobyl catastrophe is possibly the most well-known, it is—as Kate Brown argues in *Plutopia*—far from the only example of severe consequences of mismanaging nuclear power (2013: Introduction). What the HBO series provides is a dramatized version of the events, focused on the tremendous effort to contain the spread of the radioactive material; another important aspect here is uncovering the true causes of the explosion, despite the Soviet regime's determination to conceal them.

This article is part of a larger project, devoted to representations of nuclear power and their relationship to sublime poetics. This paper's specific goal, however, is to demonstrate how the *Chernobyl* series engages the sublime to address the visual aspects of the disaster. For this purpose, images such as the pillar of ionized air or the burning reactor core, often interspersed with shots of stunned onlookers, will be discussed. The chosen images are strictly connected to the crucial point of the disaster, which is the explosion of Reactor Number Four. Only two episodes refer directly to the explosion and its immediate aftermath, while the rest of the series deals with other aspects of the disaster, such as the effects of Acute Radiation Poisoning (*Open Wide, O Earth)* or the work of the Liquidators in the Exclusion Zone (*The Happiness of All Mankind*).

Theoretical Aspects of the Sublime

In *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye defines this key term as a sensation of "repeated experiences of awe and wonder, often tinged with an element of terror" (XVI). More broadly, he describes the encounter in the following way:

> An object, natural or man-made, disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, forcing the observer to grapple mentally with its immensity and power. This amazement occurs most easily when the observer is not prepared for it; however, like religious conversion at a camp meeting, it can also occur over a period of days as internal resistance melts away. Kant distinguished between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. In either case he expected that in the aftermath of the immediate experience the individual would become conscious of 'our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us.' (Nye 15-16)

According to this description, what is needed for the sublime to occur is a specific object (broadly understood) possessing qualities that will shake the observer to their very core. For a long time, the sublime was associated mostly with awe-inspiring natural objects or phenomena. Immanuel Kant, one of the theory's founders, offers the following examples:

> [B]old, overhanging and, as it were threatening cliffs, thunderclouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes, with all their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river. (in Nye 7)

The objects in question share certain qualities such as vastness, grandeur and—in some cases—destructive capabilities. Edmund Burke, who wrote one of the most influential works on the subject, i.e. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), lists qualities such as obscurity, power, magnitude, light, and silence or, conversely, loud sounds (73-122). Thus, the volcano is a perfect example of a natural object that engenders the sublime. The eruption is a grand spectacle of devastating power, accompanied by a deafening roar, when enormous amounts of smoke, debris and lava are shot into the sky. However, even sheer magnitude is capable of

producing the experience, for example massive cliffs that dwarf a person in size.

However, man-made objects can also become a source of the sensation. Thus, spectacular feats of engineering might be as sublime as a natural object. Nye offers the example of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, opened in 1937, which used to gather admiring crowds, because, as he describes it, "this magnificent piece of civil engineering cannot be comprehended through words and images alone. When visited, it outstrips expectations" (XI). What produced the effect was the vastness, coupled with the unimaginable level of human ingenuity needed to construct such an object. Other examples include the Erie Canal, a structure stretching for over 300 miles from Albany to Buffalo (Nye 32-33), and—of course—nuclear power manifested in the atomic bomb.

Another important division, apart from the natural / man-made dichotomy, is Kant's differentiation between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The first category refers to objects or phenomena that are vast and incomparably massive, such as the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. The dynamic sublime, on the other hand, covers phenomena that are inherently terrifying, but, because of the distance from the danger, can be safely appreciated. A volcanic eruption or a thunderstorm would fall into this category. In his book Nye also considers the atomic bomb as an example of the dynamic sublime (225).

Whether it derives from natural or man-made objects, the sublime is an unusual mixture of wonder and terror. As already suggested above, in this paper I focus on physical manifestations of nuclear power, the context for which is usually planned destruction (as with the atomic bomb), or else a malfunctioning of devices designed to harness such power (as with the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant). While I discuss these as evoking the dynamic sublime, I am nevertheless aware that, due to the sheer vastness of the disaster and its consequences (e.g. radiation levels), it could also be considered as an example of the mathematical sublime.

It is interesting to consider the actual reactions to the effects of the atomic bomb, which will serve as a point of reference for the explosion at the Chernobyl. One of the witnesses to the detonation of the atomic bomb, General Leslie Groves, describes his feelings as follows:

> The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No manmade phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse, and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after the explosion came first, the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate. . . . It had to be witnessed to be realized. (in Feis 380)

Groves focuses on colors, which, according to Burke (110-115) are among the possible sources of the sublime, especially when light and darkness are contrasted. The flash of the explosion overpowers the reasoning faculties to the extent that the experience verges on the religious: Groves finishes his account by comparing the force of the atomic explosion to that held by God. According to Renata Gambino and Grazia Pulvirenti, "the dynamic sublime evokes feelings of limits and nothingness in the viewer" (6) and this seems to be the case with Groves. He purposefully uses the phrase "puny things" to emphasize the insignificance of himself and his companions when faced with the tremendous power of the atomic bomb. It is, therefore, unimaginable that such force stored in Reactor Number Four could have been harnessed by humans.

The reaction to the explosion described above is relevant to the *Chernobyl,* because it perfectly captures one of the central ideas in the series. Accompanied by many images depicting unleashed nuclear power, the prevalent theme is that of an inability—or, quite simply, unwillingness—to comprehend the scale of the disaster. The characters are often left speechless by the manifestations of

atomic power. According to Nye, more generally, "[t]he amazement occurs most easily when the observer is not prepared for it" (15). Naturally, no one present at the Chernobyl site was even remotely prepared to face the event, from the massive atomic bomb-like explosion, through the unnatural air glow, to the rapid transformation of the natural environment. The shock came both from the sheer power unleashed by the explosion that ripped apart the building and created a spectacular phenomenon, and from the magnitude of national and global consequences. After all, the heightened levels of radiation were first detected in Sweden (Higginbotham 2019b: ch. 12).

Valery Legasov—one of the main characters in the show, based on the actual chemist and investigator of the Chernobyl disaster—adequately summarizes the situation: "You are dealing with something that has never occurred on this planet before" (*Please Remain Calm).* While it is true that no similarly spectacular or disastrous nuclear accident had occurred previously, many others had still proven incredibly dangerous on the local and sometimes continental level, such as the 1957 accidents at Windscale (Higginbotham 2019b: ch. 2) and the Maiak Plutonium Plant (Brown 2013). However, it is Chernobyl that has found its way into the popular consciousness, possibly due to many documented, unique phenomena resulting from high levels of radiation.

Towards the Sublime in *Chernobyl*

One of the first images in *Chernobyl* that can be analyzed in the context of the sublime is the shining pillar of ionized air. Due to Cherenkov radiation, the tremendous levels of charged particles speeding through the air caused it to glow with a faint blue light (Jorgensen 422). In *Midnight in Chernobyl*, a book detailing the actual events, we come across the following reaction from one of the engineers, Alexander Yuvchenko (as paraphrased by author Adam Higginbotham):

> a shimmering pillar of ethereal blue-white light, reaching straight up into the night sky, disappearing into infinity. Delicate and strange and

> encircled by a flickering spectrum of colors conjured by flames from within the burning building and superheated chunks of metal and machinery, the beautiful phosphorescence transfixed Yuvchenko for a few seconds. (Higginbotham 2019b: ch. 6)

The sight was clearly mesmerizing enough to put a knowledgeable technician into stupor. As Brown observes, the engineer himself remembered thinking about the sight as "beautiful" (in Brown 2019). The miniseries depicts many similar reactions to what Higginbotham calls a "shimmering pillar of the ethereal blue-white light" (2019b: ch. 6). In fact, one of the opening scenes in the first episode, titled *1:23:45*, presents Lyudmila and Vasyli Ignatenko looking through the window at the unusual phenomenon. The camera focuses on their astonished expressions as they approach the window, enchanted with the eerie sight. The scene is almost completely silent, except for a subdued background noise. The dramatic irony here consists in the characters' complete unawareness of the extent of the danger, which is, however, perfectly apparent to the viewer. Yet its scale and unexpectedness are enough to make them fall into quiet observation. In Burkean terms (97-99, 115-116), the magnitude of the sight and the accompanying silence can be said to summon the feeling of the sublime.

Another scene worth investigating in this context occurs at the so-called Bridge of Death. According to Higginbotham, this is one of the urban legends that arose around the Chernobyl disaster. Supposedly, a group of people observed the fires at the nuclear power plant from a nearby bridge and subsequently all died of radiation sickness (Higginbotham 2019a). A mere tale, it still found its way into the series alongside factual events—likely because of the scene's dramatic potential. Let us investigate it more closely.

We see a group of people from Pripyat, enraptured by the sight of the burning power plant and the pillar of ionized air. One of the awestruck observers even calls the sight "beautiful" (*1:23:45*). This may in fact point towards the Kantian dynamic sublime, in which, as already stated, the key factor is distance from the dangerous phenomenon and the consequent ability

to appreciate it in safety. Soon, ash starts falling from the sky and the scene takes on a darker tone as the camera, in slow-motion, shows the crowd reacting to the ashfall, reaching to the sky to catch it with their bare hands, while children are seen playing in it. Obviously, the onlookers consider all this an unusual but innocuous phenomenon. The result—the silent night, the sudden ashfall—makes for an enchanting scene. Nevertheless, because of its inherent dramatic irony, the viewer cannot receive it as such, knowing that those depicted here will soon feel the effects of acute radiation poisoning. The horror is amplified by the scene's overwhelming silence. As the ash begins to fall, diegetic sounds disappear, leaving the visuals accompanied only by quiet, foreboding background music with mechanic, industrial overtones. Silence is one of the qualities mentioned by Burke; the scene's serenity, or even beauty, is laced with horror, leading to the creation of a sublime experience.

Figure 1. The burning Reactor Number Four (*1:23:45)*.

Other images crucial to the context of sublimity are the shots of the burning reactor core from the same episode. In the first one, a group of technicians, having entered the ruined room, are struck dumb at the precipice of the

inferno. As Katerina Deligiorgi explains in her more general comments on sublimity, it has the power to bypass our reasoning faculties. She claims that "the object we seek to judge eludes and overwhelms us" (Deligiorgi 31). Thus, only after a few seconds do the engineers regain their senses enough to escape from the reactor room. However, once again, it is actually the viewer who is able to fully appreciate the (dynamic) sublime quality of nuclear power, at a safe distance. Comments that have appeared under this scene when excerpted on YouTube point in this direction. By no means scientific, these are thoughts of casual viewers, who struggle for words to express their sensation. The striking image of the burning reactor core has often elicited religious metaphors and similes, for example: "they were looking at hell itself," or "I don't think I've ever seen a more perfect depiction of staring into the Heart of Hell itself" ("*Chernobyl* [2019] Reactor Core Meltdown Scene"). This religious discourse, intermixing terror and awe, seems not unlike that of the creators of the atomic bomb, whom I quoted earlier.

Figure 2. The igniting Reactor Number Four (*Vichnaya Pamyat)*.

Another image, closely connected with the previous, is presented in the last episode, titled *Vichnaya Pamyat* [Russian for 'eternal memory'], outlining how Reactor Number Four exploded. In the sequence, the steel lid covering the reactor, weighing more than a thousand tons, is thrown off to the side. Against the dark, gloomy interior, the inside of the core lights up, and the rising fire ignites the remains of the cooling rods. Slow motion allows the viewer to absorb the haunting image of a man-made volcano about to erupt. The tremendous unleashed power is emphasized once again by an eerie, machine-like wail which indeed resembles, as quoted in Higginbotham, "the protest of a giant beast in anguish" (2019b: ch. 5). Significantly, sounds that imitate cries of men or animals are among the specific qualities listed by Burke as possibly leading to an experience of the sublime (118-119).

The grandeur is heightened by the contrast between the dark silhouette of the shattered lid and the rising fire, in keeping with Burke's notion that the sublime may be linked to color, specifically to the contrast between light and darkness (110-112). Playing against the horror of the spectacle is the continually present aspect of awe: that such tremendous power had been harnessed by humans and contained in a machine. Therefore, apart from emphasizing a mismanagement of immense proportions, the image speaks to the ingenuity of scientists, engineers and technicians, and their ability to tame nature. Once again, the viewer can absorb and appreciate the image in the safety of their home. It is the screen and the fictional representation that creates the necessary distance which allows the viewer to appreciate the bizarre, terrifying shot of the tangled cooling rods and the igniting core. Thus, horror and awe meet in the described image, and produce a sense of the dynamic sublime.

Figure 3. The creation of the Red Forest (*1:23:45)*.

The last image that I shall discuss in my paper is a shot of the radioactive smoke cloud floating towards Pripyat. This, as Brown explains, is how the "Red Forest" was created after being struck with one of the largest levels of radiation in the days after the accident (2019: ch. The Swamp Dweller). As the cloud passes over the forest, within just a few seconds we see the trees turn copper red. The contrast between the massive, black cloud, the Red Forest beneath, and the city of Pripyat in the distance, produces the effect of sublimity. Once again the visual aspect—in this case an almost otherworldly, nebulous mass, even more toxic than a cloud of volcanic gases—is emphasized by a strong contrast between the cloud (black) and the trees (red and green), as well as the near-absence of background music. Here, as Nicole Hall describes it, "we can be conscious of nature's powerful and violent forces only from a position of distance and safety that enables us to constitute our capacity for judging nature without fear" (9). The result of seeing the site up close is different, as attested by Kate Brown, who visited the Red Forest in 2016. Witnessing the unusual effects of high radiation, such as the lack of decomposition, she writes in

Manual for Survival, "I should have been happy to find a place where time had nearly stopped. Instead it filled me with dread" (2019: ch. The Swamp Dweller).

Without question, the Chernobyl disaster was a horrific event of global consequences, leading to the suffering and death of multitudes. What I have undertaken to describe in this paper is how the 2019 mini-series resorts to categories of the sublime to represent nuclear power. As Nye observes, the sublime can be engendered both by natural phenomena and man-made creations, and nuclear power can be analyzed under the rubric of the dynamic sublime. The characters in *Chernobyl* experience awe and terror when met with the physical manifestations of atomic power. The same could be said about the viewers, who are in a position to be also capable of acknowledging the sublime quality in the images on the screen. Moreover, they might have better chances of experiencing it, due to a vast temporal and spatial distance from the presented events. This power is a peculiar one; a source of terror due to its sheer destructive potential, it is simultaneously awe-inspiring, magnificent, and aesthetically captivating. The creators of the *Chernobyl* mini-series certainly realized this, and put this to creative use.

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Abstract

In *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye defines the main critical term as "repeated experiences of awe and wonder, often tinged with an element of terror." This sensation may be evoked by confrontations with astonishing sights, man-made as well as natural. Thus, both the Golden Gate Bridge and a vast volcanic eruption may be considered in these terms, that is, respectively, as examples of the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. While the former of these categories, described by Kant in *Critique of Judgment*, concerns encounters with massive structures or phenomena, the latter refers to terrifying scenes viewed from a safe distance. An example of a sublime phenomenon is nuclear power in its physical manifestations. Although years of research have gone into grasping its characteristics, it still evades the reasoning of the mind. Its perplexing nature has drawn researchers, writers and filmmakers. One of the recent examples—and the focus of my article—is the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019), written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, which outlines the consequences of losing control over nuclear power. I intend to demonstrate how the sublime is evoked in *Chernobyl* (2019). For this purpose, I will focus on images such as the pillar of ionized air or the burning reactor core, often

interspersed with shots of stunned onlookers. The analysis speaks to a broader point, namely that after decades of supposedly becoming accustomed to the presence of nuclear technology, it remains beyond words and comprehension: a sure sign of the sublime.