

Blog

Worried about pandemics? Maybe you should watch Chernobyl

Guest blog post by Mulle Birch Olsen

Mulle Birch Olsen • 30 January 2024

How did you cope with the emotional distress of “You-Know-What” in the spring of 2020? Some people wound down by learning how to crochet. Some honed their baking skills. Others, strangely, turned to scary media, as evident by the popularity of HBO’s *Chernobyl* and the pandemic movie *Contagion* during the early days of COVID-19 (TelevisionStats.com 2023; Trends 2023). I also watched *Chernobyl* and found, paradoxically, that it alleviated some of my pandemic anxiety. Why?

A possible answer to this conundrum is that *Chernobyl* offers viewers a “better” source of negative emotions compared to the nebulous anxiety caused by the pandemic.

Before diving into how *Chernobyl* achieves this, we need to understand why people watch and enjoy scary media such as horror in the first place. As it turns out, horror functions as so-called “threat simulation,” and humans have evolved to enjoy this kind of simulation because it allows us to learn about dangerous scenarios in a safe setting. In other words, we enjoy horror because it provides valuable insight that might benefit our survival (Clasen 2021; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2023).

Chernobyl also simulates a threat – a threat that, like a virus, is airborne and invisible: radiation. In the miniseries, however, the threat of radiation is made far more tangible and quantifiable than that of a virus through the use of certain threat cues – sights and sounds that signal danger.

One such cue is graphite, a benign-looking, dark mineral that, when used in a nuclear reactor, is highly radioactive. In *Chernobyl*, graphite acts as a visual representation of radiation. Whoever touches it or comes too close suffers gnarly radiation burns, as the viewer learns in a scene involving a firefighter.



Figure 1 Screenshot from Chernobyl, Episode 1 (Mazin 2019)

In the scene, a Chernobyl first responder picks up a piece of radioactive graphite, unaware of the risk. He drops it after a few seconds, following concerns raised by his colleague. Two minutes later, we see the same person on the ground, screaming in pain. This is followed by a close-up of a burnt, blistering hand.



Figure 2 Screenshot from Chernobyl, episode 1 (Mazin 2019).

From such a scene, disturbing as it is, the viewer is able to gain important knowledge about radiation: it is fast, invisible, and harmful. This knowledge reduces anxiety caused by the so-called “fear of the unknown” by making the unknown, i.e., radiation, more known. The visual cue of graphite is also accompanied by an auditory cue in the form of the chilling “clicks” of a Geiger counter. These clicks signal danger in a more literal sense, becoming more intense as radiation increases.

Such threat cues, which a virus lacks, make for a more predictable and less anxiety-inducing simulation. By simulating a threat that, to our lizard brain, is like a virus with fewer unknowns, Chernobyl is able to “hijack” our pandemic anxieties and transform them into more palatable negative emotions, reducing anxiety (Scrivner and Christensen 2021).

So, if you're feeling especially worried about COVID-19 or any airborne threat, for that matter, maybe give Chernobyl a watch.

This blog post is based on Mulle Birch Olsen's BA project "Chernobyl as Pandemic Practice: The Appeals of Scary Media During Scary Times" (from the 2023 course "Recreational Fear: Scientific, Historical, and Aesthetic Perspectives"). The exam paper will soon be available in its entirety in the journal *Leviathan* (Olsen 2024).

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