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Transnational Misfortunes: Fictionalizing Chernobyl

Michale Boganim's *Land of Oblivion* (*La terre outragée*, 2011)

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Despite the enduring resistance of many historians, the place of fiction films as a valuable source for the analysis of historical events has become deeply entrenched in academia. Research on film and history has come a long way since seminal works by Siegfried Kracauer, Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin first entered the film studies syllabi in universities around the world. Today, academic journals and networks dedicated to the theme proliferate.[1]

Thirty years ago, a tragic event happened that would rapidly establish itself as symbol of a major historical transition – and thus as a logical juncture for film and history to interact. The accident at the nuclear plant in Chernobyl cast a shadow of fear and incertitude that went on to cloud Europe's spirits for years to come. In hindsight, we know that the developments following the tragedy were symptomatic of the decadence of the crumbling Socialist regimes.

As accurate information about the catastrophe slowly began to leak, cinema appropriated the shared trauma of a real nuclear disaster. From numerous documentaries such as *Chernobyl Heart* (2003) or *The Russian Woodpecker* (Chad Garcia, 2015) to American mainstream horror fiction films like *The Chernobyl Diaries* (2012), filmmakers have plowed the ground that was laid bare by eye witnesses, journalists and historians. On the whole, fiction films directly depicting the events and its consequences are harder to come by than documentaries. The collective imagination surrounding the subject has been of greater interest to American and, to some extent, Ukrainian documentary filmmakers.

The best-known arthouse fiction film about Chernobyl was made within a different production context. If the radioactive cloud beset Europe in 1986, it is

not surprising that a European co-production was the first fictional project to be granted permission to shoot in what remains of the ghost-town of Pripyat. Michale Boganim's *Land of Oblivion* – the film in question – reflects the current standard production model for arthouse films in Europe and the effects of its logic when applied to a subject matter that is of interest beyond national borders.

Relatively new to film studies is the idea of transnational cinemas, which was inherited from works that broached globalization's effects on the broader social and cultural spheres while recognizing the limits of a national approach to film analysis in our days.[2] Pioneering works by Hamid Naficy (1996) and Sheldon Lu (1997), who first applied the term "transnational" to film, focused primarily on non-Western filmmakers working in the context of the Western film industry. Not surprisingly, some of the early favored subjects were émigré filmmakers working in Hollywood and the circulation of their works in the USA and in Western Europe.

Nowadays, transnational film analyses are gaining popularity, with a multitude of publications and even a journal ("Transnational Cinemas") dedicated to this approach.[3] The idea of the concept "transnational" is multidimensional: it is not limited to the narrative and aesthetic forms chosen by filmmakers working within a foreign context; it also addresses fluxes in production's logistics and funding, in the films distribution and reception. *Land of Oblivion* is a film that fits various facets of the transnational definition, being exemplary of the power struggles that are constitutive of its economic and subsequent diegetic dynamics.

The director, Michale Boganim, is an Israeli filmmaker born in Haifa, in 1977, to a Moroccan family. She went to university in France, where she started her film studies, and later joined the National film school in London. Having made six documentaries, *Land of Oblivion* is her first fiction film.

The film is a co-production between France, Germany, Poland and Ukraine. Funding was mostly French and inter-European: among the partners we should mention are the French National Film Center (CNC), Arte France Cinéma, French media group Orange, CinéCinéma (also French), the French region of Basse-Normandie, as well as the European funding programs MEDIA and Eurimages. While the cast is mostly of Ukrainian or Russian origin, the film crew, especially the creative team, is predominantly French.

This configuration, which could also count on the support of a German production company, a Polish production company and the Polish Film Institute, was ideally placed for gathering the 5M euros budget. With French investors and a French crew, the film could enjoy diverse funding mechanisms from France, not only the public support of the CNC, but also from private (Orange Cinéma and Cinécinéma) and public television (Arte France). At the same time,

Polish and German co-producers not only brought in resources, but also allowed the film to apply for funding in Brussels.

Finally, the film was shot on location in Ukraine, thus also having a local Ukrainian and Russian crew and casting. With permission to shoot in Pripyat, the delocalization of the production had both economic and aesthetic advantages. In this sense, this economic production model corresponds to the ideal plan for arthouse, mid-budget European films.

This smart financial plan is coherent with the creative aim to showcase the real ruins of Chernobyl's surroundings and show that historic event through the eyes of "common people". The formula turned out to be successful. *Land of Oblivion* was not a box-office hit (around 70.000 tickets were sold in France), but that was not its main objective. With television partners on board from the beginning, the film had already guaranteed distribution on TV before hitting the big screens. More importantly, it made it to various film festivals around the world, winning some notable awards, and was positively reviewed in the specialized press like the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

The transnational economy of the film translates into a transnational narrative and aesthetics. Set in Ukraine, the film features Russian-speaking characters and has its share of French-language dialogues. The first 40 minutes of the film are set during the time of the catastrophe, in 1986. In the first sequence, we see a landscape while a narrator reads a literary-sounding text about apple trees. Then we discover Pripyat as we are introduced to the film's characters, with a female voice-over telling the audience about the events taking place. The film then begins to alternate dialogued scenes and interstices with the female narrator whose voice will later turn out to belong to main character Anya.

The film relies on plot schemes that are very familiar to audiences interested in dramas with a historic background. It follows the trend of looking at major events through the lens of their implications on the daily life of ordinary people. Thus, the Chernobyl accident happens during Anya's wedding, disrupting scenery that had thus far been idyllic. As her husband is obliged to leave the party to fight the plant's fire, finding almost immediate death, Anya is left behind alone. The second plotline tells the story of a very heroic engineer, who, conscious of the disaster but unable to alert people to the damage, tries his best to protect those around him, strangers or not, finally giving up his endangered family.

The second part of the film is set ten years later, in 1996. Anya, now a tour guide in Pripyat, is the stereotypical Eastern European woman. She is beautiful, but somehow worn-out for what we assume are the psychological and physical tolls of the traumatic event. The rest of her story revolves mostly around her love life, which is torn between a local man who corresponds to her hidden desire to stay at the zone and a French man (the receiver of the voice-off

message) who could help her leave, as one presumes would be the desire of anyone living in the area. The (melo)drama continues: Ana starts losing her hair, she reveals that she cannot have children, and finally finds an excuse to stay.

The continuation of the engineer's story in 1996 is mostly shaped by the return of his teenage son to Pripyat on another kind of tour – a pilgrimage of victim's families who want to pay their respects to their late relatives. Valery, the son, does not want to leave the ruins of his childhood town and is willing to leave clues to his father, who he hasn't seen ever since the evacuation. We then find out that Alexei, the engineer, has become a kind of insane hobo who takes train after train to try and reach Pripyat.

Images are clean cut, the narrative is classic, and imagery of Pripyat serves as a curiosity for foreign audiences to feast on. The heroic dimension of the characters and the melodramatic turn of Anya's story also served Western audiences well, allowing the film to gather festival support. The foreign element is also present in Anya's narrative. She is a tour guide for foreigners interested in black tourism. She's also tempted to conform to the shared desire to leave. In this context, the underlying theme of the film – the incapacity to leave one's motherland behind come what may – is put behind due to the weight of appealing narrative solutions.

The original French title of the film, "La Terre outragée", would translate better as "the insulted land", which brings in the notion of intentionality: someone offended this otherwise peaceful place with sheer neglect. "Land of Oblivion", the international title, highlights the idea of forgetting, something that the main characters are unable to do. One can also read the authorities' forgetting of the people in Pripyat as a political message, though forgetting seems to be a softer act than that of actively insulting.

Land of Oblivion shows how the transnational character of a film's economy and aesthetics can be intertwined. Looking back at historical events and their consequences is no easy task. Nor is it an easy task for an arthouse film to find its audience. In this film, the relation between the characters and their historic background ultimately remains marginal to the narrative: their memory seems as neglected as the country they come from.

References

See Screening the Past, the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST), Film History Journal, etc.

Some key works worth mentioning are Ulf Hannerz's Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places, London and New York: Routledge. (1996); Arjun Appadurai's (1990), 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural

Economy’. In: Theory, Culture and Society, 7:2/3, pp. 295–310.

For studies on the concept of transnational films and further references on the subject, see Deborah Shaw’s chapter “Deconstructing and Reconstructing ‘Transnational’ Cinema”. In: Contemporary Spanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film and Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim’s article “Concepts of transnational cinema” in Transnational Cinemas Journal.