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Chernobyl/Chornobyl¹ Imagery in Popular Music: Voices From Ukraine

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Abstract

The Chernobyl disaster took on planetary significance, but Ukrainian voices were marginalized for many years by more powerful, dominant discourses. This paper explores how Chernobyl trauma has been re-presented by Ukrainian popular music artists between 2000 and 2020. The case study focuses on narrating, visualizing, and vocalizing strategies by Andriy Kuzmenko, Nata Zhyzhchenko, and Valeriy Korshunov. The author aims to show how these projects were inspired by the Anthropocene ideas. The paper demonstrates how the Ukrainian artists crossed territorial and cultural borders while concurrently transforming the image of the Chernobyl Zone from being a bordered alienated land into a borderscape of interaction between diverse agents.

Keywords: *Chernobyl; Anthropocene; popular culture; contact zone; world-making*

Introduction

There is a significant body of literature exploring the causes and outcomes of the fourth reactor explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on the territory of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1986 (*Exposures and Effects*, 2000; Mould & Richard, 2000; Petryna, 2013; Higginbotham, 2019; Hundorova, 2019; Ploky 2018, 2021; etc.) The event has been described as a disaster, catastrophe, trauma, and turning point in reassessing nuclear energy, its merits, and threats. It has invigorated the environmental movement across Europe and far beyond (Borewicz, 2022; Kalmbach, 2021; Bauer, 2022).

¹ The spelling of the toponym is a topic for enduring debates. The explosion of the Nuclear Power Plant happened on the territory of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, then a part of the Soviet Union. Because of the constant prohibition of the Ukrainian language and the aggressive politics of Russification, Russian was used as the only language for official communication within the USSR. Correspondently, other languages transliterate/ transcribe proper names exclusively through the mediation of Russian spelling norms. Thus, Chernobyl crossed the linguistic borders and became recognizable throughout the world.

Recently, Ukraine has actively promoted its proper names to be transliterated directly from the Ukrainian language. Today, Western readers can easily recognize Kyiv, not Kiev, Odesa, not Odessa, Mykolaiv, not Nikolaev, etc. Some names were adopted by foreign media due to massive online campaigns, such as #KyivNotKiev, while others are still struggling to be recognized. Chernobyl is among them. The progress is slow, but it has already been started in scientific and scholarly publications (Hundorova 2019; Ploky 2021; etc.).

In the paper, I tackle several Ukrainian popular cultural projects that added to Ukrainian voices of the Chernobyl concept. Being a Ukrainian scholar, it is responsible and logical that in my writing I use Chornobyl. Chernobyl appears only in quotes or authentic names of the projects under discussion.

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The catastrophe created entirely new borders around the contaminated territory, the zone of exclusion, within Ukraine and Belarus. As a result, thousands of people and livestock became internally displaced from the affected lands. Before becoming strictly bordered land, these territories were one of the first spots inhabited by people on the European territory after the last Ice Age. As Mary Mycio advocates: “*Their evacuation in Chernobyl’s wake brought an abrupt end to some 25,000 years of continuous—if not uninterrupted—settlement in one of humanity’s most ancient European homelands*” (Mycio, 2005: 36-37). Thus, in the socio-cultural dimension, the native knowledge about the land was severely damaged if not entirely lost.

The explosion and spread of deadly radiation across the continents led to visible geopolitical changes too. The relationships between the Soviet Union and Western countries deteriorated but triggered the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War (Plokyh, 2018: 248; Perga, 2019: 55). The disaster simultaneously caused the intensification of re-/bordering activities among former Soviet republics, paving the way to the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Chornobyl meltdown ecological outcomes are seen as strikingly controversial. On the one hand the explosion severely damaged the ecosystem (Faybishenko et al, 2015; Chanyotha & Ambrosino, 2023) and posed yet unresearched hazards to people’s physical and mental health (Kuchinskaya, 2014; Yamashita & Thomas, 2017; Tapia 2022). But within years, “*contrary to the myths and imagery, Chernobyl’s land had become a unique, new ecosystem. Defying the gloomiest predictions, it had come back to life as Europe’s largest nature sanctuary, teeming with wildlife*” (Mycio, 2005: 1-2). Eventually, the Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve was established in the exclusion zone. It is now considered the biggest reserve in Ukraine and the third of such type in Europe.³

In public sphere, Ukraine as a newly independent, post-communist, and post-colonial state faced with numerous constraints of how to speak about Chornobyl. The primary concern was whether it had its own right to re-read, re-assess, and re-write its past, more broadly “*can the subaltern speak?*” (Spivak, 2003). In that context, Ukrainian artists and activists had to find tools to re-present what had already been represented within the hegemonic power of Soviet rule and Western “interpreters.”

Scholars also started to apply eco lenses to the interpretation of Chornobyl texts. For example, an environmental philosopher Michael Marder analyses photograms, imprints of Chernobyl radioactive plants, produced by Anaïs Tondeur. He advocates that “*a work on Chernobyl must first decide how to broach a theme that incessantly reverts back into the unbematrixable*” (Marder & Tondeur, 2016). While a Ukrainian researcher Maryna Vardanian insists that “*the Chornobyl theme fits into ecofiction organically*” (Vardanian, 2022: 6).

This paper provides insights on Chornobyl representations in popular culture from an interdisciplinary perspective in the context of border, trauma, and memory studies. The case study focuses on Ukrainian popular music projects from 2000 to the 2020s by Andriy Kuzmenko, Nata Zhyzhchenko, and Valeriy Korshunov. I argue that in response to Chornobyl’s losses, deaths, massive migrations, traumas, and ecocide, the Ukrainian

³ Find more on the official webpages of the Chornobyl Radiation and Biosphere Reserve <https://www.zapovidnyk.org.ua/>, the Chornobyl Research and Development Institute <http://chornobyl.institute/en/news/2020/08/04/65/view>, and the Website on Nuclear and Radiation Safety and Non-proliferation <https://www.iaea.org/en/chernobyl-radiation-and-ecological-biosphere-reserve>.



community started to “craft meaningful realities and stories for themselves out of their engagements with what is around them, even as they contend with hostile circumstances” (Pratt, 2022: 8). In Mary L. Pratt’s words, the aim of such a world-making project is not “to preserve traditions but to create futures for the young” (Pratt, 2022: 8) and “as is often the case, popular culture anticipates what is coming: the new knowledges will be planetary, and they will address all of the humanity, linked now by a shared fate” (Pratt, 2022: 6).

This future-oriented interpretation of the Chernobyl knowledge might seem to contradict the very idea of the Chernobyl zone because the alienated land must stay uninhabited by humans for hundreds of thousands of years ahead. But if we look at the zone as a contact zone where non-human species and powerful field forces, such as invisible radiation, meet and interact, our stereotypical perception might be seriously challenged. This tension between backward- and forward-looking perspectives is what defines different popular culture projects in Ukraine, and across its borders to the West and to the East. The latter two contexts will be used in this paper only sporadically in support of the argument.

Voicing Chernobyl

In 2000, the Ukrainian rock-pop band Skryabin premiered Andriy Kuzmenko’s song “Chernobyl Forever” (Skryabin, 2012) from the album *Fashionable Country (Modna Krajina)*. Andriy Kuzmenko (aka Kuzma Skryabin) was born in 1968, so he was 18 when the Chernobyl Power Plant exploded. Andriy Kuzmenko started to gain popularity in the 1990s as a lead singer of the Skryabin band, a songwriter, a composer, and a producer. In the 2000s he was among the most recognizable Ukrainian pop celebrities, hosting musical TV shows on leading Ukrainian channels, giving concerts all over Ukraine, and publishing poems and memoirs. He was deeply respected for his pro-Ukrainian position and his support of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and he became an iconic figure of his generation after his tragic death in a car accident in 2015. His songs and books are enjoying enduring popularity. New renditions of the song “Chernobyl Forever” have also been released recently.

The lyrics of the song are composed of imperative sentences and advice for living:

do not break, do not saw, do not chop

the branch on which you are sitting

do not wait, do not be silent - who is silent

will get into trouble

do not litter and do not spit into the river—

you will come for water more than once

you live and leave—leave

*at least some life behind yourself*⁴ (Kuzmenko, 2000)

The string of imperatives—“do not break,” “do not saw,” “do not chop,” etc.—denotes the negative impact of human activities on the natural world, but in their communicative function they are

⁴ The lyrics are translated by the author of the paper from the online lyrics database “Ukrainian Songs,” accessed November 1, 2023, <https://www.pisni.org.ua/songs/514900.html>.

future-oriented. The singer does not deny harm, loss, or disaster: he tries to show the young a doable way of living in the hostile present and future they face.

The chorus links the narrator's wisdom with Chornobyl knowledge:

Chornobyl forever

we don't need such happiness anymore

Chornobyl forever

go away and rest in peace (Kuzmenko, 2000)

The first line proves the idea that the Chornobyl disaster is not “*an abnormal occurrence*” (Arndt, 2012: 9) anymore. It has become a part of the everyday agenda. The usage of the word “*happiness*” as a synonym for Chornobyl in the second line creates a sarcastic tone. The final line draws a temporal border away from Chornobyl as bad luck and something which is already dead. So, the chorus re-presents Chornobyl dualistically. On the one hand, it is what already happened and could not be fixed. On the other hand, the Chornobyl experience proves the traditional indigenous wisdom and its cultural continuity as something we should rely on in our co-existence with nature at present and in the future.

The second verse extends metaphorical meanings of the song through the image of a boomerang:

you should think and not to dig

a hole for yourself and for people

a boomerang will fly and get back forever

and don't say you didn't hear this (Kuzmenko, 2000)

The boomerang could be interpreted as a symbol of revenge by nature to people damaging the environment. It could also be seen as something coming back constantly and haunting humanity, such as diseases, memories, pain, loss, and trauma. But Chornobyl radiation is also an invisible boomerang that transcends time and space. It might inflict hazards to future generations hundreds of thousands of years into the future even without their awareness. Finally, the last line attempts to raise such awareness. The narrator's voice provokes his listeners to re-interpret human existence as a co-existence with other species and powerful forces if they want to survive in a new Anthropocene chronotope in which “*human's own actions return to haunt them in forms they utterly failed to anticipate*” (Pratt, 2022: 123).

In contrast to thought-provoking lyrics, the melody of the song is catchy and easy to remember. The chorus is sung four times, and it sticks in the ear through lyrical and musical repetitions. The flow of the tune is very lively, energetic, and it inspires listeners to dance.

The video clip added a lot to the dialogue between the celebrity and his followers, providing viewers with the strong voice of the author rooted in the Ukrainian perspective. In the video, Kuzma is the main character moving on top of other scenes while wearing protective gear or uniforms. His silhouette doubles several times in two mirrored images, which are merged into one body with two heads. This merging may be an allusion to mutations after exposure to radiation. In one moment, the singer turns his face, and we see his right cheek and temple corroded like after being burnt. In this scene, he visually resembles those who were really



damaged by the Chornobyl fires, but due to an effect of unexpectedness his face can be equally seen as a reference to popular images of Chornobyl zombies and mutants. In the background, there are flashing scenes of Ukrainian protestors in the streets, outside and inside of the Ukrainian Parliament building, Chornobyl landscapes, people planting trees, and people supporting the Green Party and holding slogans, such as “No more radiation” and “Ukraine is not a European wasteland” (Skryabin, 2012).

During the final seconds of the video clip, Kuzma and his band members are in front of the Chornobyl plant moving toward the camera while there are words written in green on the entire screen: “*We want the future without Chornobyl.*” This slogan shows that Chornobyl is still strongly associated with the catastrophe and its negative influence on various aspects of people’s lives in Ukraine. The video also expresses the idea that Ukraine is slowly transforming into a burial place of nuclear waste from other European countries. Thus, the Skryabin band voices concerns about the future of the country from both angles—ecological and political. There is also a striking contradiction between the slogan “*We want the future without Chornobyl*” and the song title “*Chornobyl Forever.*” The deserted Chornobyl power plant and the beeping sound of a radiation measuring instrument finalize the message (Skryabin, 2012).

The video is also characterized by extremely unnatural bright colors—yellow, green, and magenta—which are typically associated with a distorted vision of reality because of radioactivity. In addition, the international radiation symbol, a black trefoil around a small black circle in the center of a bright yellow bigger circle, flashes on and off the screen during the whole video.

By that time, in the context of all projects presented by the Skryabin band, “Chornobyl Forever” adds to the realization that Ukraine is an independent country with its own right to make choices and defend its lands—including Chornobyl, which matters as a painful but important site. Kuzma’s song and especially the video capture the precise moment when Chornobyl legacy is accepted in Ukrainian society as an inseparable part of its past, present, and future. This acceptance provokes the development of green consciousness and the rise of green parties.

It is important in the context of this case study to highlight that Chornobyl was re-presented from a new perspective in the context of Ukrainian popular culture. Finally, the younger generation went away from the contradiction of glory-trauma rhetoric; Chornobyl was re-presented in the future-oriented context of Ukrainian nation-building. Both Chornobyl and Ukraine were shown in wider cross-border debates on the future of the Zone and nuclear energy, and one of the first attempts to get rid of Anthropocentric rhetoric was undertaken.

In contrast, a more conventional use of the symbolism of Chornobyl may be illustrated by a song “Sognando Chernobyl” (Celentano, 2012) by an Italian singer named Adriano Celentano. Celentano is known for his criticism of nuclear energy. In general, the lyrics of the song and the video clip illustrate that “*Chornobyl is a symbol which represents manmade catastrophe, the destruction of culture, a threat to human life, an exclusion zone, an ecological crisis*” (Hundorova, 2019: 31). Celentano’s rhetoric relies on despair and an enumeration of destructive human deeds that have led to catastrophes worldwide. The appeal to God in the lyrics and an image of Christ walking in the radioactive skies, on rising waters, and finally disappearing in the distance, evoke an idea of unescapable approaching Apocalypse. Celentano’s 11-minute video also includes images of spectacular landscapes, both nature and city, which in the upcoming

scenes are distorted by radioactive colorings or are destroyed by hurricanes, floodings, and explosions. It also presents people's faces and bodies: once beautiful dancing women, then tortured or mutated; identical figures of men in black suits repetitively and mechanically marching in rows; and an image of the singer himself in a sparkling outfit with a glass of wine or spirit. It looks like Celentano is watching a show and preparing to celebrate the final minutes of life before its collapse.

The repetitive chorus "*We all together will blow up, boom!*" illustrates far too well a crisis of futurity but gives no clues how to live on. Celentano appears to be "*a global agent*" while Kuzmenko is reimagining himself as "*a planetary subject*" (Pratt, 2022: 10).

Both popular singers offer "important building blocks for our imagination," and both create stories that "injected imagined landscape with meaningful, emotional associations" (Es et al., 2021: 11). But their symbolic location in this imagined space and the tone of their emotions are different. The analysis demonstrates Andriy Kuzmenko's Ukrainian Self being entirely engaged in the Chornobyl present and future while Adriano Celentano's outsider optics reveal him as a concerned Other in an entirely hostile setting.

"The Voice We Have"

The second case illustrates further attempts of the new Ukrainian generation to vocalize the Zone in metaphorical and direct senses. Nata Zhyzhchenko, the lead singer of the Ukrainian band ONUKA, was born a year before the explosion. Her father worked at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power plant from 1986 to 1988. In her many interviews, Nata admits that Chornobyl has accompanied her throughout her whole life; she defended her Master thesis on how the catastrophe influenced the traditional culture of the region; for one week she worked at the plant herself; and she continues to visit the Zone regularly. In her words, "*The tragedy is ours, but the catastrophe is planetary*" (Zhyzhchenko, 2018).

Her music projects cannot be entirely placed into a niche of popular music. Rather, they stand at the crossroads of different genres, including electronic, modern pop, and Ukrainian folk. The band also experiments with modern and ethnic musical instruments, and even the band title is an honorary reference to Natalia's grandfather, a famous traditional instrument maker. This music is not created for mass consumption, but it has been favored by many listeners and viewers in Ukraine and worldwide. The public presence of the group and its lead singer has been quite noticeable in mass media, TV, live concerts, and tours since the project's launch.

The second of ONUKA's extended play (EP) premiered in 2016 and is named *Vidlik*. Its title might be translated as both 'a countdown' and 'a new beginning.' The EP includes two compositions, "1986" and "Vidlik," devoted to Chornobyl. In her interview with the Ukrainian TV channel "1+1," Nata positions her music as an attempt to re-introduce the memory of the event although "*the society and mass media moved this theme to periphery long ago*" (Zhyzhchenko, 2016). ONUKA's music projects seemed successful in re-reading the tragedy and challenging the stereotypes as well. Both projects have also reached an international audience.

The composition "1986" (ONUKA, 2016, April 26) raises questions about post-Chornobyl human and fauna co-existence, memory, history, ecology, and our common future on linguistic, acoustic, and visual layers. I will analyze them parallel to each other.



The official video clip opens with an image of the Chernobyl station drawn in gradually intensifying red puncture lines on a black background while the instrumental introduction establishes a stable rhythm. Such an appearance of the iconic image equally alludes to blood spreading through veins, and/or to the plant as a live creature, and/or to the tragedy and death after the plant's explosion. In several seconds, the image of the plant is replaced by images of animals and birds—a wolf, an owl, an eagle, a rhino, a tiger, a deer, a lamb, a rabbit, a lion, etc.—created in similar stylistics but in whitish inks on the same black background. Each image appears in rhythm with every new beat creating a hypnotizing effect. The visual and audial sequence is supported by the opening lines “*Hypnotized by little things, Hypnotized by might*”⁵ (ONUKA, 2016, April 26). The listeners/viewers may answer the question who is hypnotized by whom and who is more powerful—a human creation or nature—by themselves because there is no direct answer in the composition itself.

The variety of creatures also exceeds the limits of the Chernobyl zone, as lions or rhinos are not the animals habituating in the territory of Ukraine. In such a manner, the visual sequence of the images expands the borders of the tragedy to its planetary scale.

The singer continues with words of advice:

Feel relief and lay down to taste the sun

Hear the vibe of the ground

Let your soul escape your phantom pain

Heal your mind and clear your brain (ONUKA, 2016, April 26)

Structurally, they are imperative sentences like in Andriy Kuzmenko's song “Chernobyl Forever,” but semantically they underline the value of a present moment and unity with nature. The moment is not defined, though. It might be any point in the past, real present, or future. We also do not know who the narrator is, whose voice we hear.

A kind of climax comes in the middle of composition when we see a red enhancing number 1986 on screen and hear the archival telephone conversation between fire station operators in the minutes after the explosion. The voice of the singer and music fade for a minute but intensify again when the number is replaced with images of animals once again.

In the following part of the composition the verbal layer is composed of full sentences repeated in a loop in a way that they lose their causal relations:

But life is too short

And nothing for tomorrow's left

And death is so sure

And nothing for tomorrow's left

But life is too short

⁵ The lyrics are quoted from the YouTube page of the official video for the composition, accessed November 1, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dWkLNxKgWc&ab_channel=ONUkAn.

And death is so sure... (ONUKA, 2016, April 26)

This part disrupts the order and the priority of what goes first, life or death, the Chernobyl explosion as an end of life or as a new beginning, whether it brought devastation or revival, and whether there are any borders between those categories. The final words “*We fly like a feather, So immune and free*” (ONUKA, 2016, April 26) add to endless possibilities of interpretation. The words are backed by the gradual silencing of music and the distinct beeping sound of a radiation measuring tool.

Immediately, there are many similarities between Kuzmenko’s project in 2000 and Zhyzhchenko’s composition in 2016. But, there are vivid differences too. Firstly, in the 2016 project, the speaker is invisible but her voice, the voices of the witnesses of the tragedy, lyrics, music, and video create a space evoking memories, questioning the dominance of humans, and erasing any time limits.

Secondly, the priority of interpretation is given to a listener-viewer. They are entitled to a huge amount of freedom, and the only limits for their interpretation are their knowledge and experience of Chernobyl. And these limits are not even explicitly mentioned. The creator plays with the hints and layers of meanings: the more you know, the more you can get. But the absence of knowledge will not prevent you from enjoying the mesmerizing and beautifully arranged score. So, in this production, Zhyzhchenko introduces the idea of individual responsibility in a new way. The key questions are how to remember, what to remember, how to use the knowledge, how to live on with that memory, whether there is any future at all, whether there is any future for humans whom we also don’t see because the visual priority is given to animals and birds, and what is left from humans are just their voices.

Thirdly, the English language lyrics of “1986” is a clear sign of crossing linguistic and territorial borders. This is an attempt to expand the potential audience and to add to Chernobyl awareness worldwide.

In the second track from the EP, “Vidlik/ Countdown,” Nata gives voice to the station itself before it explodes. The lyrics consist of one verse:

I. Breathe. Want.

I. Stop. Talk.

I. Press. Countdown.

*Only. Future. Ready.*⁶ (ONUKA, 2016, April 13)

The verse is repeated in a sort of artificial or mechanical way. The words separated by full stops or pauses create a myriad of associations about the last moments before the explosion and a polyphony of thoughts, fears, and expectations.

The composition was presented by ONUKA and the NAONI orchestra during the interval act at the Eurovision Song Contest Grand Final (ONUKA, 2017, May14) in Kyiv in 2017.

⁶ The lyrics are translated by the author of the paper from the ONUKA official YouTube music video channel, accessed November 1, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRHwWGO_A48&ab_channel=ONUKA.



This was the first but not the last time when the theme of Chernobyl was used by Ukrainian artists to represent Ukraine to the world at the Eurovision Contest.

The strategy of giving voice to alternative non-human entities in ONUKA's repertoire vividly reveals her goal of transforming Chernobyl's bordered space into a more-than-human contact zone. At the same time, the band's projects, grounded in local folk traditions, blending archaic and modern sound, and playing with different genres and styles, sustain their enduring popularity. In a 2020 column for Ukrainian *Vogue*, entitled "The Voice We Have," Zhyzhchenko admits that speaking about Chernobyl is her enduring personal choice and duty as an artist. She also advocates respect toward nature and all natural resources. And she questions whether our memory is strong enough to keep us safe from ourselves now and in the future (Zhyzhchenko, 2020).

The problem of tailoring the future from what we have or from what is left after the Chernobyl catastrophe has been in the center of another multimedia project named Artefact. The next part of the paper presents its several outcomes.

Chernobyl Sounds Archives

In 2018, a highly acclaimed Ukrainian media artist Valeriy Korshunov started to record a variety of sounds in the Chernobyl zone to establish an audio library called the Chernobyl Sounds Archives. It is admitted by contemporary scholars, the archive is not important by itself but rather "*through its circulation, reuse, and the experiences of media audiences*" (Papenburg & Holger, 2016: 141). The sounds of Chernobyl space, natural sounds and sounds of abandoned manmade mechanisms, were used to create digital samples which were later explored in a few spectacular art projects.

In November 2018, Korshunov's first Artefact installation, a digital sculpture with artificial intelligence and the first in a series of other of Korshunov's projects was demonstrated in the central square in Prypiat to tourists and more than 200 journalists from all over the world. The event was also covered more than 300 times by different media. Svitlana Korshunova, a co-organizer of the event, explains the key message of the performance: "*The aim was to attract attention to the problem of how fakes and post-truth influence our lives. We looked at how information was manipulated after the Chernobyl catastrophe*" (Pylypiuk, 2019). This was an attempt to revitalize the Zone, give it a voice, and transform it from a secluded space into a space of creativity while posing controversial questions and exploring the past from the point of view of modern technologies and art. The tension between stereotypes and the passion of a new Ukrainian generation of artists to change attitudes toward Ukraine and Ukrainian art through Chernobyl as its vehicle become quite vibrant in much of the coverage from the Artefact presentation. As an example, a *Guardian* journalist meticulously documented the controversies between the scenery of the ghost city and the rave of the disco, the youth dressed in improvised protective uniforms and the workers of the station, the catastrophe, and its commodification through selling souvenirs with radiation symbols (Seymour, 2018).

Trying to re-introduce the very concept of Chernobyl, the 2018 Artefact digital sculpture was profoundly redeveloped and presented at the international exhibition *Burning Man* with an ambition "*to show that Ukraine today is not what you have always known about it, not what you are reading about it in media. Ukraine has talented people who are working on the border between art and technologies*" (Pylypiuk, 2019).

Thus, Chornobyl is becoming a field of interplay between imagination and improvisation for the new generation of Ukrainian artists. Through its complex imagery they challenge the stereotypes, re-introduce both the concept of Chornobyl and the image of Ukraine while crossing numerous political, cultural, and aesthetic borders. Overall, since its launch, the Artefact project has been an example of participatory popular culture. Valeriy Korshunov and the Artefact team made their digital projects open for local and international artists aiming to create a network of cross sectoral connections. Their ideas, samples, and archives have been used in subsequent projects, or, better to say, in further variations and expanded contexts: “ARTEFACT. Chernobyl 33,” a documentary; “Chernobyl. First radioactive rave,” an exhibition at Kyiv River port in 2019; a virtual art residency for more than 200 artists in 2020; and a virtual exhibition titled “ARTEFACT. CHORNOBYL 34.”

One of the Artefact projects featured Andriy Kuzmenko’s song, “Chornobyl Forever,” which reached an audience in 2020 again because of this placement. In addition to the ways presented, the archive of Chornobyl sounds invested into a separate endeavor titled “Sounds of Chornobyl.” The project was initiated to mark the 35th anniversary of the disaster. The official website of the project states: *“The Chornobyl disaster affected millions of people around the world. This is a harrowing story, which is still painful to talk about, but any injury must be treated. Music and songs have always helped to feel and rethink”* (Sounds of Chornobyl, 2023). Many musicians were granted access to the library, and had a chance to visit Chornobyl, participate in a Chornobyl art residency, record tracks, and shoot video clips in the Zone. They include an Australian beatboxer Dub FX, an Icelandic band GusGus and an electronic musician Bjarki, a French Grammy nominated project Telepopmusic, the Ukrainian performers Krut, Kazka, Stasik, Vagondrivers, Atomic Simao, and a duet of Sergey Mikhalok, a well-known Belarussian lead singer of Liapis-89 band, and a Ukrainian-American singer Oleksandr Chemerov. As it is seen, the musicians come from different countries and represent diverse musical genres. That makes the project truly trespass multiple cultural and aesthetic borders, and its participants crossed the official borders of the Chornobyl zone.

The key idea of “The Sounds of Chornobyl” is to prevent the transformation of the zone of alienation into the space of oblivion. It is a social project aimed at informing the younger generations about the catastrophe and its influence on different spheres of life after the meltdown. As a Ukrainian singer, war veteran, and volunteer, Anastasia Shevchenko (Stasik) comments, *“Chornobyl has fallen into our blind spot. We are ready to give this land, these people, and this history to alienation, just not to realize that Chornobyl is not the past, but our present, and what we, our children, grandchildren, and dozens of generations will live with it”* (Sounds of Chornobyl, 2023). The main channel for communication with the young generation was through popular music.

Within the Artefact project, the duet of Mikhalok and Chemerov recorded a tribute version of Andriy Kuzmenko’s song “Chornobyl Forever,” and a new video clip was shot in Prypiat. Twenty years after the song was written, these artists suggested that it still has an important message: *“Chornobyl is not only a manmade and environmental disaster, and informational. The omission of information about the accident in the past led to an insane number of victims, and silence around it today can lead to new trouble”* (Sounds of Chornobyl, 2023). The duet is also an illustration that Belarus and Ukraine suffered the most after the explosion, but also that such a catastrophe does not pay attention to borders, and it has influenced the whole of humanity.

The project “Sounds of Chornobyl” was successfully completed, and, in October 2021, the vinyl disk was played by Valeriy Korshunov in one of the abandoned school yards in Prypiat.



The disk itself is made with a special light absorbing substance, so it radiates light in the darkness. The jacket of the disk is designed with elements of added reality which link users with comments from the performers. The price for the disk was also symbolic. It cost 1986 hryvnas, and the money earned was donated to charity funds supporting Chernobyl liquidators and victims of the disaster. Nowadays, the disks are collectable rarities and are quite expensive. Looking through the lenses of cultural theory, *“There is a wonderful circularity to this: songs are used to sell products and the fact that they do this successfully is then used to sell the songs”* (Storey, 2015: 12). Though in this case, the product was Chernobyl with all its imaginative heritage.

What is notorious in these projects is that the Zone has been gradually departing from being a magnet just for the dark tourists striving to witness the abandoned wasteland. It is transforming into a meeting place for creativity, imagination, and cross-cultural narratives. The Artefact moved further in investigating the concept of Chernobyl within a popular participatory cultural approach. Their projects were diverse in the sense that they were both tools and approaches, in that they attempted to create a sort of modern archive open to the future, and in their polyphony of post-Chernobyl voices that they have managed to represent.

Cool the Hot Zone

In the years after the disaster, the Chernobyl concept started to obtain diverse characteristics. Being cool and trendy are among these characteristics, as well. I end my paper by briefly mentioning two more examples of how the theme was further used as a soft power tool during the Eurovision Song Contests by Ukrainian contestants.

In 2020, a Ukrainian electro-folk band Go_A represented Ukraine in Eurovision with the song “Shum” (Go_A, 2021). The song’s lyrics and rhythm are inspired by a thousand-year-old traditional ritual of calling spring. The characters of the song are gods and spirits of forests who are asked to wake up the nature when spring comes. The leader of the band Kateryna Pavlenko admits that this composition’s roots are in the Polissya region, the territory hugely affected by Chernobyl meltdown (Ryliov, 2021). The video clip shot in Chernobyl grasps the gap between indigenous coexistence with nature on the one side, and modern ecological crisis, including nuclear post-apocalyptic and present-day pandemic references, on the other side. The visual layers are comprised of stylized and easily recognizable images for a world audience. As one of the commentators says, *“A ukrainian woman that looks like she’s come from matrix, riding a car that looks like is from mad max, in Chernobyl dancing with people that look like they come from breaking bad. Absolute perfection”* (Darkbeautifulwistedchronicles, 2021). That comment received hundreds of tweets and by this date there are more than fifty thousand comments in the conversation. The official video was watched more than thirty-three million times. In terms of popular culture, we witness how fan culture around Eurovision has spread Chernobyl imagery in direct connection with other iconic popular culture images. At the same time, Go_A vocalizes the Chernobyl space on the crossroads of archaic and modern, sacred and profane, animalistic and technological, waking to life on the eve of spring but dead and damaged by human deeds.

In the 2023 Eurovision, Ukraine was presented by an electronic music duo called TVORCHI, who won the National contest with the song “Heart of Steel” (TVORCHI, 2022). In their onstage performance in the pre-Eurovision Ukrainian contest, they expanded an associative layer of the lyrics—which might be as narrow as a personal fight against all odds, as wide as a

fight of the Ukrainian nation against the Russian invasion, as universal as a reference to Superman as a man of steel—through visual references to nuclear fears. The onstage performance included a video sequence of images of people wearing gas masks and numerous projections of a radiation symbol in a bright yellow color repeatedly crossed by red lines in tune with the beat. So, the visual component with its allusions to the nuclear threat, which was in the air after the full-scale invasion, expanded the meaning of the lyrics.

Overall, Chornobyl is not just a historic event, ecological disaster, technological catastrophe, or remarkable intergenerational trauma. Nowadays, it is also a powerful cultural concept intricately connected with Ukraine's imagery on the crossroads of genres and styles. The memory of Chornobyl is efficiently used to cross the borders of established stereotypes and challenge the dominant narratives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to show future-oriented strategies used by Ukrainian vocalists in re-presenting Chornobyl as a contact zone within planetary discourse of the Anthropocene.

The paper demonstrates one of the routes alongside which the image of Chornobyl was presented, maintained, and hugely transformed by popular music performers in Ukraine. These routes were dictated by the needs of society to react to the challenges of post-Chornobyl and post-Soviet times. One of Ukraine's vital needs was to find its own voice to overcome trauma, and to integrate this voice into a new reality. This new reality has also been related to the unpredictability of the future in the epoch of the Anthropocene. So, the Ukrainian singers and musicians started to voice the memory of Chornobyl in terms of its importance for the present and the future of Ukraine and the whole planet. In contrast to the Soviet policy of silencing and the Western tendency of negative exoticization of Chornobyl as a dead zone, the diversification of voices became the key strategy for Ukrainians in re-visioning and re-presenting the popular image of Chornobyl and Ukraine across its borders.

Three case studies—"Chornobyl Forever" by Andriy Kuzmenko, ONUKA's EP "Vidlik," and Valeriy Korshunov's project Artefact—illustrate the Chornobyl experience through the artistic lenses of two succeeding generations. For Andriy Kuzmenko, Chornobyl is still a painful experience, a trauma, but already a moment in the past that must be integrated in a new political and environmental history of Ukraine as an independent state. The Chornobyl zone is potentially dangerous, but its borders are crossed by the musicians. It becomes a scenic setting and a character in their video clip.

ONUKA's experiments with music genres and sounds, such as archival telephone conversations from Chornobyl, the beeping of radiation measuring instruments, and the entitling voice to the Power Plant itself, together with the huge freedom given to listeners and viewers of the video clips, create a unique Chornobyl counter-narrative. This counter-narrative includes voices of multiple species and powerful field forces, such as air, water, fire, earth, and invisible radiation. The space of the catastrophe is expanded to the planetary scale in which the Ukrainian point of view on the tragedy is powerfully articulated through its traditional vocal and instrumental sounds.

Valeriy Korshunov's multiple and manifold projects are placed on the aesthetic borders between being archives and being an international space for experimenting with multiple aspects of the Chornobyl legacy. This project has also unlocked the borders of the Zone as a



space for cultural tourism in addition to traditional dark tourism (Banaszkiewicz, 2022). It also illustrates quite well the rhizomatic characteristics of our technological world, where all texts of culture are not just related to each other but are also re-read numerous times in different formats. Such texts cross territorial borders, show the limits of reality and art, and reveal digital worlds as spaces of uncountable reproductions.

To conclude, the paper demonstrates how the Ukrainian voice of Chernobyl has been developing in popular music for the past two decades. After 2022, when Ukraine is at the epicenter of world attention again, new nuclear threats are looming on the horizon, the borders are shifting and fluid, and the war of memories turned into the war of weapons is bringing new ecocides (Gardashuk, 2022; Sousa et al., 2022), death, devastation, and migration. The experience people of Ukraine gain from the efforts of artists to overcome Chernobyl legacy, and their ways of voicing this legacy, hugely assist in foregrounding the resilience. These efforts provide effective mechanisms for dealing with the ongoing crisis of futurity.

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