CHERNOBYL, CHORNOBYL AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the representation of animals in the drama series *Chernobyl* (HBO, 2019). In doing so it evidences anthropocentric narrative; that is, story-telling in which the prioritisation of the human and human-centred matters are normalised. Drawing on specific examples from the programme, it shows how animals are used as representational resources enabling the series' human-centred narrative to be told, in particular focusing on the depiction of the death of animals, and the use of animals as metaphor. The article draws on approaches arising from the 'animal turn', which aims to decentre human-ness as the only form of experience and to critique speciesist hierarchies. *Chernobyl* is a useful case study for such an analysis precisely because the historical event it depicts is one that had, and continues to have, significant consequences for non-human beings.

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1. "STORIES CAN BE WEAPONISED": THE CAT IN THE APARTMENT

The first shot of the five-part drama series *Chernobyl* (2019) is of a domestic cat reclining contentedly on a sofa in a living room. The narrative then follows the cat as it later moves to under a kitchen table in another room, watching the human who is also present in the home. The human puts food out for the cat, and there follows shots of the cat eating its meal. The final shot of this sequence, immediately before the programme's title card, is of the cat back under the kitchen table, this time engaged in grooming. In all, the cat is depicted as having a comfortable and fulfilled domestic life, fully catered for in terms of shelter, warmth and food.

Yet while this opening scene follows this linear narrative of the cat, the programme's main interest is not really the animal itself. For alongside this series of events is the story of the human who fed the cat and who shares the feline's home. This is Valery Legasov (Jared Harris), and he is shown to be recording what appears to be a confession, or an exhortation, into a tape recorder, then hiding the resulting tapes behind a grating in a wall outside his apartment, before returning to his kitchen and hanging himself. Over this, we hear some of what Legasov is recording:

> What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is if we hear enough lies then we no longer recognise the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories?

Against this more dramatic sequence of events the cat's activities may appear insignificant. Indeed, narratively the cat's purpose is to function as a mundane counterpoint to Legasov's decision to end his life, symbolising a domestic everydayness against which a suicide is more shocking. So while this opening scene functions to introduce the programme's audience to Legasov, who goes on to be the main character in the series, the cat, unnamed, is never seen again.

Legasov's recording indicates that he is interested in the ways in which we 'content ourselves [...] with stories'. His interest arises from what the rest of *Chernobyl* will go on to depict; his attempts, as a chemist, to cling to scientific truth in the face of an all-powerful state keen to tell lies to its populace in order to maintain its dominance. *Chernobyl* repeatedly returns to the question; how do events get turned into stories, and what are the consequences of the stories that are told? Craig Mazin, the programme's creator and writer, has outlined how this question was the fundamental motivation for his making of the series:

> [I]t is a story about the cost of lies. This is the first line of the whole show and this is the theme that we are going to continue with as people watch these episodes; that when people choose to lie, and when people choose to believe the lie, and when everyone engages in a very kind of passive conspiracy to promote the lie over the truth, we can get away with it for a very long time but the truth just doesn't care. [...] Stories are sometimes very good ways of conveying interesting truths and facts but, just as simply, stories can be weaponised against us to teach us and tell us anything (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "1:23:45" [1.01]).

Mazin goes on to joke about the irony of his using a narrative form – the television drama series – to critique narrative itself, and signals that this contradiction was his motivation for taking part in the *Chernobyl Podcast* series that accompanied the television programme's broadcast.[1] Thus the podcast is a space in which he can outline "what we do [in the programme] that is very accurate to history, what we do that is a little bit sideways to it, and what we do to compress or change" (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "1:23:45"). In doing so Mazin acknowledges how this version of events is itself a story, and one that – because of the conventions of television narrative and episodic broadcasting – requires components such as recurring characters, cliff-hangers, and a recognisable beginning, middle and end. *Chernobyl*, then, does not aim to fundamentally critique and reject forms of storytelling but, via the congruence of its key themes and the material discussed in the podcast, instead holds up for examination the power that authorship of narrative entails.

To return to the cat: what about that story? This article examines how *Chernobyl* constructs the events it depicts predominantly in human terms, as if the historical moment it recounts affected, and has ongoing significance for, only humans. In doing so the series draws on and recreates anthropocentric narrative conventions that are dominant

1 *The Chernobyl Podcast* is a five-part series in which Craig Mazin is interviewed about his creative decisions by the radio presenter Peter Sagal. Each podcast episode was released immediately after the broadcast of the television episode it discussed, meaning that audiences were invited to engage with Mazin's discussion as part of their ongoing consumption of *Chernobyl*. See Warner Media Press Releases (2019).

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in human-centred culture, and which therefore permeate television's storytelling practices. While such a critique is applicable to the vast majority of narratives, *Chernobyl* is a particular example for two reasons. Firstly, as noted above, the programme is itself about the ways in which events become stories and thus might be expected to be attuned to the power structures inherent in storytelling. Secondly – and related to the first – the marginalisation of animals from this narrative is a significant act of exclusion precisely because the real-world event depicted is one that had, and continues to have, far-reaching consequences for non-human beings. However, while *Chernobyl* might be an acute example, it can also be seen as indicative of television's normalised anthropocentric storytelling practices. As such there is an alternative story that could be told here, and it is one that takes into account the "long-term impact on ecosystems" (Savchenko 1995: 31) of the events depicted. To understand the historical moment that *Chernobyl* mines for its story as something solely – or even predominantly – of consequence for humans is, in Mazin's words, to 'weaponise' the past. And so just as the cat Legasov shares his apartment with soon gets forgotten, so is *Chernobyl* a persistent forgetting of the non-human beings central to the story it tells.

2. **CHERNOBYL AND CHORNOBYL**[2]

Chernobyl tells the story of what is usually referred to as 'the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident', 'the Chernobyl accident', 'the Chernobyl disaster' or simply 'Chernobyl'. On 26 April 1986, during a safety test, the number four reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine exploded (see Medvedev 1991, Plokhy 2018). This led to airborne radioactive material being released into the atmosphere for nine days, which was carried by winds across large swathes of Europe. The nearby town of Pripyat, where many of the plant's workers lived, was evacuated. A 10-kilometre exclusion zone was put in place around the plant which still stands to this day, now extended to 30 kilometres. Overall, "The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 was the most severe in the history of the nuclear power industry" (International Atomic Energy Agency n.d.).

Or, that's one way to tell the story. Scientific discourses have dominated the narrativisation of the events at Chornobyl, becoming so normalised as to be virtually unquestionable. This is partly because the event is tied up in "the ideological importance of science and technology to notions of civilization and progress" (Harper 2001: 119) that constituted part of the East-West battleground during the Cold War. But it is also emblematic of the "orthodoxy" of science, in which scientific epistemologies are so dominant that it is possible to posit we live in "the age of science" (Williams 2015: 1). This has led to criticisms of "scientism" or "scientistic" prejudice, in which science functions as a "tyranny" in terms of making sense of the world (Hayek 1942: 269, 268, 271). Despite this, this thing called 'science' is the dominant way in which the event called 'Chernobyl' is made sense of, with 'official' accounts being undertaken by scientists and validated by scientific epistemologies.

Resisting this, there are battles over how to tell the story that is usually called 'Chernobyl', and it "has become the metaphor for the failure of one-dimensional explanatory attempts" (Kuprina 2016: 3). So, Svetlana Alexievich's book *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997/2016) aims to memorialise those who died during the event through elision of the present and the past, thus rejecting a straightforwardly linear way of making sense of it. Johanna Lindbladh's study of Ukrainian, Belarussian and Russian films that depict 'Chernobyl' unearths positive narratives of "rebirth [...] on a personal [rather than societal or political] level, intimately connected to the characters' discovery of profound existential, moral and religious values" (2019: 240). Krista M. Harper finds that memorial events in Hungary serve as a "demonstration of transnational citizenship and environmental solidarity" (2001: 122). And the possibilities of 'Chernobyl''s meanings are shaped by the technologies and knowledge being used to tell the story; Daniel Bürkner shows that photography's inability to depict the non-visual matter of radiation has resulted in an 'aesthetics of invisibility' (2014), while Melanie Arndt reminds us that "Even today [...] not all the technical, physical, biological, medical, and psychological consequences of the reactor explosion have been understood, simply because of their enormous complexity" (2012: 2).

What 'Chernobyl' means is up for debate, and *Chernobyl* is part of that debate. Mazin states he agreed to participate in the *Chernobyl Podcast* precisely to engage in that debate, and to discuss how *Chernobyl* constructs its version of events.

2 'Chernobyl' is the Russian spelling of the place that, in Ukrainian, is 'Chornobyl'. As the accident took place while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union 'Chernobyl' was the spelling that reporting of the event spread around the world even though for Ukrainians this was incorrect. The Russian spelling is used here where source material referred to uses it, such as in the title of the programme under discussion; otherwise the Ukrainian spelling is used.

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For example, the series largely depicts Legasov as a lone voice urging the Soviet state to come to terms with the organisational structures that led to the explosion. In this he is supported by Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson) a nuclear physicist who is one of the first people to become aware of the spread of radiation across Ukraine. Khomyuk is an entirely fictional construct. As a caption at the end of the programme's final episode states, she was created "to represent [...] and to honor" the "dozens of scientists who worked tirelessly alongside him [Legasov]" and who "were subject to denunciation, imprisonment and arrest" ("Vichnaya Pamyat" [1.05]). The decision to turn scores of scientists into a single character conforms to a narrative logic in which viewers are offered recognisable, returning characters through which the story is told. Similarly, the decision to place Legasov as the key character through which audiences encounter other characters, and whose struggles function as the beginning and end points of the narrative, constructs *Chernobyl* as a particular kind of story.

These battles over the 'truth' of what happened remain, though, anthropocentric. Absent from these narratives are animals, and the impacts the explosion and resultant irradiation of large swathes of the environment had upon beings that are not human. While scientific work has more recently examined the long-term effects of radiation on the wild animals that now live in the exclusion zone, it is significant that "There are no early census data [about animals] from Chernobyl just after the accident" (Møller et al. 2013: 78). Yet 'Chernobyl' has become extremely significant in thinking about human-animal relations in the former Soviet Union and other countries, particularly in terms of environmentalism (see Gould 1990: 80-99, Marples 1991 and Plokhy 2018: 285-299). The exclusion zone has become an inadvertent wildlife preserve which "regardless of potential radiation effects on individual animals, [...] supports an abundant mammal community" (Deryabina et. al. 2015: R284). Some data suggests many animals are more abundant since 'Chernobyl' for one simple reason; "humans have evacuated the contamination zone" (Baker and Chesser 2000: 1231). The longer-term narrative of the event called 'Chernobyl' is then one with significant animal and animal-related consequences, such that as a story it can be written as a "natural history" (Mycio 2005).

Chernobyl is a useful case study for demonstrating the ways in which narratives of such events are made anthropocentric. As will be shown below, animals appear in lots of places in the series, and are often key to a number of significant narrative moments. But *Chernobyl* has no interest in animals *as animals*; they exist within the story solely for the purpose of furthering the anthropocentric narrative. Once their narrative use is fulfilled they disappear, with the cat in Legasov's apartment an early example. *Chernobyl*, then, contributes to an understanding of 'the Chernobyl accident' congruent with that which informed policy-makers' decisions at the time, scientific analysis then and since, and other stories told about what happened. By this process thousands of animals affected by radiation – and other events that happened at the time – are written out of the story known as 'Chernobyl'.

3. ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

Chernobyl is emblematic of a dominant form of story-telling that I am calling 'anthropocentric narrative'. Such narrative has a number of dimensions:

- First, it centres on humans and human-ness as predominant narrative agents, around which all aspects of story circulate. Events within such narratives are presented as meaningful and significant only because of their relationship with humans and human-ness. This might evidence human agency, such as when human actions propel the story forward; or it might evidence human response, such as via reaction shots.
- Secondly, anthropocentric narrative offers the human world as an unquestioned and normalised locus of activity. Importantly, it does so via the exclusion of other possible ways of responding to, and making sense of, the world, such as that of non-humans.
- Thirdly – and as a consequence of the first two components – it ideologically prioritises human needs and desires over those of other beings, by the simple but powerful act of the exclusion of alternatives.
- Finally, anthropocentric narrative interpellates human audiences via the simple act of presenting human-ness as the entry point for comprehension and understanding, and its anthropocentrism logically follows from its exclusion of other modes of comprehension. Humans live in an anthropocentric world; anthropocentric narrative is therefore an unsurprising consequence of centuries of prioritisation of the human.

It is important to note that anthropocentric narrative can occur even when what is being depicted is not human. For example, natural history documentaries have been criticised for how they narrativise animal behaviour within human ideologies such as "the nuclear family, or the values of hard

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work" (Bousé 2000: 18). This means anthropocentric narrative employs animals as representational resources for human-centred purposes. For example, while the opening shot of *Chernobyl* may be of a cat, the programme's narrative does not situate the cat's needs, consciousness, or engagement with the world as significant, instead using the animal as nothing more than a counterpoint to the tale of the human Legasov. As such animals are routinely trapped within anthropocentric narrative structures, and as the examples below from *Chernobyl* will show, this renders matters such as animal death as nothing more than literal meat for human-centred storytelling.

In situating the representation of animals in media texts such as *Chernobyl* as important, this article is aligned with the 'animal turn'. Rejecting simplistic speciesist epistemologies, approaches arising from the animal turn are engaged "with such questions as nonhuman agency, the relations between subject and object, inter-species structures of feeling, emotion and affect, [and] the function of animal metaphor" (McDonnell 2013: 6), amongst other things. Fundamental to such analytical approaches is an acknowledgment of the power embedded in the use of the word 'animal' itself, for "The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men [sic] have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (Derrida 2008: 23). Beings are made into things human cultures call 'animals', and a consequence of that process is the reinforcement of a hierarchized human-animal divide. Troubling that divide necessitates "creatural ties across the species boundary" (Herman 2016: 3) which reject "the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2008: 11).

While the animal turn has often focussed on the real-world experiences of real-world animals, how animals are constructed representationally matters too. For the analysis of audio-visual culture such as television and film this requires an engagement with questions such as,

> [H]ow do we look at animals? How does the moving image shape those acts of looking? Is this relation only ever one of capture and appropriation, thereby reiterating dominant structures of inequality between humans and animals? Might the moving image engender other, more equitable forms of relation? How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power? How might the various dimensions of moving image practice engender alternative modes of cross-species contact and attend to existential and perceptual worlds that extend beyond the human? (Lawrence and McMahon 2015: 2).

For *Chernobyl* this matters because "the way in which we portray animal representation has a crucial bearing on how we portray the place of animals in history" (Burt 2001: 204). That said, the aim here is not to ask a reductive question such as whether *Chernobyl* tells the truth about the animals it depicts. For a start, "the ethical potential of animal films cannot necessarily be mapped onto their truth value" (Burt 2002: 165). But it is also because – as outlined above – the nature of the truth that is up for grabs by the programme is itself a matter of significant debate. Rather, *Chernobyl* is a programme that, like many dramas based on historical events, is characterised by its "seriousness" (Rosenthal 1999: 4), which situates the series as a reasonable, well-researched presentation of its topic that can be understood as having a significant relationship with a consensual truth. Mazin's contributions on the *Chernobyl Podcast* attest to this, wherein he legitimises the series' many fictionalisations by their contribution to the seriousness of the project. This seriousness, though, is itself defined by its attention to the human, in which the horrors shown are connoted as meaningful and significant precisely because they impact humans.

The animal turn matters for Television Studies too as the field functions as a set of practices which has overwhelmingly and persistently prioritised the human and human concerns. In terms of narrative, this means analyses of television's storytelling consistently aligns itself with the anthropocentric reading position offered by such texts. When Jason Mittell examines and celebrates the complexity of a programme such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) this is predicated on that series' foregrounding of "human drama", "human costs", and "human decency" (Mittell 2015: 329, 331, 348). Jonathan Bignell notes "human nature" and "human figures" are fundamental to television's forms of realism, whereby a narrative "addresses its viewers as the same kind of rational and psychologically consistent individual" (Bignell 2013: 216), assuming a species-based equivalence. Where Television Studies has engaged with non-human representation it has, ironically, done so in order to explore what it is to be human, for example Roberta Pearson's (2013) work on aliens and androids in *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969) or Henry Jenkins's (2011) discussion of zombies in *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-). Absent here are animals, and volumes giving overviews and sum-

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maries of Television Studies as a field – such as Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill's *The Television Studies Reader* (2004), Ethen Thompson and Jason Mittell's edited volume *How to Watch Television* (2013), and the multiple editions of Horace Newcomb's *Television: The Critical View* (2006) – completely ignore animals in the extensive sections they devote to representation.

This analysis of *Chernobyl*, then, aims to render animals visible as matters of consideration within television narratives. It serves to trouble the anthropocentric interpellation offered by the programme and so readily adopted by much analytical thinking, arguing that such reading unthinkingly reasserts human-animal power hierarchies. *Chernobyl* here functions as a synecdoche of how television tells its stories, and while there are specific inflections that render its anthropocentrism in particular ways, this analysis is offered as an entry point to the larger matter of anthropocentric storytelling evident within television as a whole.

4. "OH, IT'S BEAUTIFUL": THE ANIMAL AS SYMBOL

In Chernobyl's final episode ("Vichnaya Pamyat") Legasov is giving evidence at the trial examining the explosion's causes. During a break in the proceedings he sits outside the courtroom with Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgård), Vice-Chairman of the Soviet Union Council of Ministers and the person who has overseen the response to the events at Chornobyl. The previous four episodes have depicted the growing working relationship of Legasov and Shcherbina, beginning with the latter's dismissal of the former's expertise and leading to a mutual respect that enables the clear-up operation to be successful. Because of the amount of time they have spent in the vicinity of the explosion they are aware that they are likely to have been irradiated. During the trial Shcherbina has been coughing. Now, outside with Legasov, he shows him the blood-stained handkerchief he has been coughing into. Shcherbina tells Legasov his prognosis suggests he has only a year to live. He worries that his life has been pointless, prompting Legasov to reassure him that the success of the clear-up operation was dependent upon his actions. As Shcherbina listens he looks down and sees a tiny green caterpillar walking across his trouser leg. He puts his finger out to it, and the caterpillar crawls onto it. Shcherbina looks at the caterpillar intently, and says, "Oh, it's beautiful".

This is an important moment of narrative characterisation that almost certainly never happened; Legasov was not even present at the trial at which the scene is set (Nicholson 2019). It serves to depict the sacrifices the characters have made in order to deal with the problems caused by state incompetence, and the mutual respect that has grown between them. It is the first point at which they vocalise their admiration for one another, and it is the first time Shcherbina has been shown as requiring external validation. And in his adoration of the caterpillar it is also the first time Shcherbina has been portrayed as anything other than entirely focused on the job at hand. How *Chernobyl* decides to depict that moment is through Shcherbina's interaction with an animal; a caterpillar. A small, almost insignificant thing, it represents beauty that Shcherbina can only now see – or now only give himself permission to see – as his life draws to an end. But a caterpillar also symbolises hope and the continuance of the world that Shcherbina has helped save, given it is the larval stage of what will, in time, become a butterfly. It needs to be this specific animal; a worm, or a bee, or a rat would not have the same meaning. That *Chernobyl* chooses an animal as a resource through which it can depict the feelings of its human characters is a trope that recurs throughout the series, and it is one which draws on the convention of the employment of non-human beings as symbols in anthropocentric narratives.

Animals have been used persistently as metaphors for human characteristics and human cultures throughout history and across a wide range of societies (see Bell and Nass 2015, Bettelheim 1976, Green 1992, Urton 1985, Werness 2004). While this has sometimes indicated intersectionality between the oppression of animals and humans (such as in work on Marxism or feminism; see Timofeeva 2016, Adams 2010/1990) on the whole the animal-ness of the non-humans employed in such symbolism is absent. Humans "use animals to perform identity" (Cuneo 2014: 3) with those animals often "chosen for this supreme symbolic function" (Willis 1974: 128). The reduction of animals to symbols is a form of representational violence for two reasons. Firstly, it depicts animals as worthy of representation only inasmuch as they are able to contribute to an understanding of the human, with a concomitant absence where such use is not possible. Secondly, it normalises anthropocentric representational forms that themselves render the animal as meaningless outside of human experience. Like the cat in Legasov's apartment, the caterpillar on Shcherbina's hand disappears from the narrative as soon as its symbolic purpose is com-

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plete. It is also a generic caterpillar, functioning to symbolise that which caterpillars can be called on to mean. It is not a specific caterpillar, an individual being, whose particularity the programme has any interest in. To employ an animal as a symbol is to engage in a process that renders an individual as nothing more than his/her/their species, with the process of species-ing animals turning beings into nothing other than their taxonomy. Critiquing the obfuscations caused by species-based categorisations, Carol Kaesuk Yoon notes that "The living world is, every minute, right before our eyes, and we are missing it all" (2009: 21).

But then, it's only a caterpillar. Who cares? What matters here is that while the employment of the caterpillar enables *Chernobyl* to communicate the sacrifice made by Shcherbina, the programme has no comparable interest in depicting the consequences of radiation for non-humans. Yet butterflies are one of the animal groups significantly affected by radiation with recorded declines in their population evident after nuclear accidents (Møller et al. 2013). *Chernobyl* invites sympathy for the death of a single human; it is largely uninterested in the deaths of scores of other beings. This can be shown in those sequences where animals dead as a result of the accident are depicted, where they too serve a symbolic and narrative function. For example, by the end of the first episode of *Chernobyl* ("1:23:45" [1.01]) while the accident has taken place, the Soviet state has refused to communicate to the public about what has happened. The final sequence of the episode shows a large plume of black smoke rising from the site of the explosion, and drifting relentlessly towards the town of Pripyat. It is a bright sunny day, and the town's inhabitants are going about their routine business. Children are shown walking to school, and the camera pans to their feet. As the last child passes the frame, a bird crashes to the ground from the sky, flapping powerlessly, and slowly dying. It symbolises the inexorable movement of the radiation from the power plant to the residential area, and the fact that the bird is unnoticed is a portent of the ignorance the town's citizens are being kept in. It's alignment with the legs of the schoolchildren blithely making their way to their studies offers a reading where it is the children that matter, not the bird. And, as it is the final shot of the episode it functions as a cliff-hanger, inviting audiences to have concern for those children and the other human inhabitants of Pripyat. As such this bird is nothing other than a narrative tool, symbolising that which future episodes of the programme will depict. There is nothing in the sequence that indicates audiences are invited to have concern for the bird, or birds more generally; instead it is simply an omen. And in doing so *Chernobyl* renders the impact of irradiation on birds (Møller, Bonisoli-Alquati and Mousseau 2013: 52-59) as narratively significant only inasmuch as it helps indicate the threat to humans, with the story of the accident's impact upon birds anthropocentrically out of its scope.

Chernobyl's construction of animals as worthy or representation only at points at which they are resources for anthropocentric storytelling is evident in how the programme outlines the consequences of the accident. The final episode ("Vichnaya Pamyat") ends with multiple captions, outlining what happened to the characters after the events depicted, and acknowledging some of the ways the programme reshaped history in order to conform to narrative conventions. It ends with the caption, "In memory of all who suffered and sacrificed". Yet this 'all' has been constructed throughout the preceding captions as only encapsulating humans. There is no acknowledgement at any point of the consequences of irradiation for beings other than humans, or for the environment across Europe that was affected. One caption states, "We will never know the actual human cost of Chernobyl. Most estimates range from 4,000 to 93,000 deaths". There is no subsequent caption outlining animal deaths (even though some have been depicted in the series in earlier episodes). While this caption has indicated that it is 'human cost' that is being communicated, anthropocentric norms mean that earlier captions can merely assume that the human-only focus will be inferred. For example, one caption states, "Following the explosion, there was a dramatic spike in cancer rates across Ukraine and Belarus. The highest increase was among children". What is meant here – but unsaid – is 'a dramatic spike in *human* cancer rates', rendering invisible the evidence of cancers among a range of non-human beings as a result of radiation (Zimmerman and Galetti 2015: 1-21). Similarly, a caption overlaid onto shots of abandoned Pripyat state that "Approximately 300,000 people were displaced from their homes. They were told this was temporary. It is still forbidden to return". As such this image of the inadvertently successful nature reserve that has flourished since the accident is reshaped by the caption as significant only because it symbolises the displacement of the human population. That the removal of humans has resulted in a significant boom in animal life is ignored by the series; the caption's references to 'displaced' and 'homes' shapes this event as one that should be read as traumatic for humans.

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5. "THE HAPPINESS OF ALL MANKIND": KILLING ANIMALS

The pre-title sequence of episode four of *Chernobyl* ("The Happiness of All Mankind" [1.04]) shows an old woman milking a cow in a barn. A soldier is present too, and he is there to evacuate her. It is clear this is taking place in the exclusion zone and the soldier is removing everyone who lives in the area. As he tells her repeatedly that she must move she continues milking, ignoring him. The soldier tells her the area is not safe. She responds that she is 82 and this has been her lifelong home, having survived previous tumultuous events such as the Russian revolution, famines, and world wars. It is clear she has no intention of moving. The soldier picks up the bucket of cow's milk and pours it onto the floor. The woman takes it back, and starts milking again. The soldier takes his gun out of his holster, and tells the woman, "This is your last warning". She continues milking. There is the sound of a gunshot. The cow falls to the ground. Driblets of milk fall from her udders, and flies land on her eye. The soldier says, "It's time to go".

This is not the only time *Chernobyl* depicts the killing of an animal as part of its narrative. Given it is a story about the threat to life that is 'Chernobyl', and the significant effort expended in order to mitigate that threat, the programme depicts surprisingly little actual human death. Yet anthropocentric narratives – such as *Chernobyl* – employ the death of animals for storytelling purposes. The scene with the cow, for example, functions to evidence the disruptions to everyday routine that were caused by the explosion. Where the old woman makes clear that a succession of historical events have engulfed her home but been unable to displace her, 'Chernobyl' succeeds in making her move. And the way in which this sequence is shot makes it clear we are invited to find the woman's displacement as more narratively significant than the death of the cow. As the soldier takes out his gun the audience is invited to assume that it is the woman who will be threatened with death. We do not see the shot but simply hear it, with the falling to the ground of the cow a surprise reveal that serves to indicate the woman is safe. As Sagal says to Mazin in the *Chernobyl Podcast*, "It's a great little fake" (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "The Happiness of All Mankind" [1.04]). A clear species-based hierarchy is offered here by the narrative; audiences should be relatively unconcerned about the cow's death given that it enables the woman to live. Records show soldiers did kill many farm animals during the evacuation, but this was because they were irradiated and thus any of their produce – such as milk – was deemed dangerous (Medvedev 1991: 189-190). But some farm animals were also evacuated because human evacuees simply refused to leave them behind; 86,000 cattle were put on trucks and driven from the exclusion zone (Plokhy 2018: 199-200, Mould 2000: 108). What could be a story about human-animal relations and the interdependence of beings is anthropocentrically narrativised in *Chernobyl* as a solely human event in which animal representation is employed for the purposes of depicting human struggle. This cow's death has significance only inasmuch as it enables the story of the old woman to be told.

This sequence is discussed in considerable detail by Mazin and Sagal on the *Chernobyl Podcast* ("The Happiness of All Mankind"). Yet their conversation evidences the discourses within which debates about animal representation take place. Sagal jokes, "We need to reassure everybody, as the ASPCA likes to say – 'no animals were harmed in the making of this episode'".[3] They then go on to discuss that the cow seen falling over is a fake one built especially for the programme. Significant here is the tone Mazin and Sagal adopt for this discussion, for they giggle throughout in marked contrast to the sombre, thoughtful mode they overwhelmingly adopt. Sagal says, "It is hilarious to think, it's like, 'Cut! Bring in the stunt cow'. And they roll in the cow on wheels, I imagine, like something out of Monty Python". Mazin agrees, acknowledging the absurdity of being on set, "In the middle of a field wheeling in the fake cow". As they joke about this, Mazin suddenly becomes extremely serious when he then moves on to discuss the old woman, and how she represents the struggles of many people trying to survive in the Soviet Union. Just as the sequence in *Chernobyl* hierarchises human trauma over that of other beings, so Mazin and Sagal's levity renders the representation of animals as little more than a laughing matter.

Western human cultures have a complex relationship with animal death, as both a factual matter within the real world and within representation. For a start, one of the ways in which humans strive to evidence their difference from other beings is in their knowledge of, and preparation for death, with the assumption that, on the contrary, "animals are incapable of a proper death" (Lippit 2002: 11) because of their ignorance of the temporal context of life. Given industrial

3 The ASPCA is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is likely that what Sagal intends to refer to here is American Humane, as this is the organisation that oversees the 'Hollywood Humane Initiative' which monitors the treatment of animals in media production.

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farming methods, animal death is a necessary component of many nation states, yet those cultures typically engage in a "cultivation of indifference" (Johnston and Probyn-Rapsey 2013: xvi) to slaughter that renders the scale of such death largely invisible. This means "only human beings can be murdered"; where humans kill other beings other terms, with the function of "making beings killable" (Haraway 2008: 78, 80), are used. Furthermore, distinctions are made between different kinds of animal; "we humans have historically carried around a veritable bestiary in head of animal totems, classifying each species according to a sliding scale of killability (dogs at one end, sharks on the other, to give only one cultural example)" (Pettman 2011: 61).

But while societies might engage in processes aimed at rendering invisible swathes of animal death in the real world, it has long been a common representational matter in mass media. For example, Tom Gunning categorises the pleasures on offer from the short film *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edwin S. Porter or Jacob Blair Smith, 1903) as reliant on audiences being invited to wonder at the "technologically advanced death" (1995: 122) inflicted on a seemingly invincible body such as that of an elephant. Similar death-related spectacle can be seen in wildlife documentaries, whose fetishization of moments of animal predation and hunting render invisible the majority of most animals' behaviour (Mills 2017: 99-103). Rosemary-Claire Collard argues that "Film's historical and contemporary exploitative and invasive treatment of wild animal bodies" normalises "violent species hierarchies" (2016: 473, 477) that categorise animal death as less significant and less meaningful than the demise of humans. Taken together these analyses posit the depiction of animal death in audio-visual matter as a resource able to be used in human cultures to both deny the actual matter of animal death in real life (especially given much of that death is caused by human activity) but also to reassert the significance of human death (especially in relation to the demise of other beings). The representation of animal death is thus a component of anthropocentric narratives, able to be drawn on in symbolic ways that reassert the notion that only human-centric stories are worthy of being told.

This is evident in the major narrative in *Chernobyl*'s fourth episode ("The Happiness of All Mankind" [1.04]). Pavel Gremov (Barry Keoghan) is a Ukrainian civilian drafted in to help with the clear-up operation. He is assigned to work with Bacho (Fares Fares) a Georgian soldier and veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war and the largely uncommunicative Garo (Alexej Manvelov), an Armenian soldier. Pavel is shown arriving at an army camp by bus, looking out in confusion at the activities going on around him, and as such he is immediately constructed as an innocent outsider through whose experiences the audience are invited to make sense of what will unfold. Bacho tells Pavel the three of them will engage in animal control, entering the abandoned town of Pripyat and shooting all the pet dogs that were left behind during the evacuation. As Bacho says,

> Yeah, they're radioactive, so they have to go. But it's not hard - they're mostly pets. They're happy to see you. They run right up to you. Bang. We load the bodies on the truck, dump them in the pit, bury them in concrete, then we drink. As much vodka as you want. Plus a thousand roubles. Let's go get you a gun.

Bacho's matter-of-fact description of the work to be done contrasts with Pavel's overwhelmed reactions, as he is introduced to a world he was previously ignorant of. *Chernobyl*'s depiction of the subsequent pet-killing draws on historical records of the massacre which meant that "the abandoned streets of Pripyat were strewn with the corpses of many different kinds of dog" (Medvedev 1991: 188-189).

So, Pavel, Bacho and Garo are shown arriving in abandoned streets, and Bacho tells Pavel he has only two rules: firstly, that Pavel shouldn't point his gun at him; secondly that he must not let the dogs suffer. As they walk towards the unoccupied houses Bacho whistles, and the sounds of dogs reacting receptively to his presence is heard via barks and the noise of animals running through fields to reach them. Bacho and Garo start shooting the dogs, but the programme does not show their deaths. Instead the camera remains in close-up on Pavel's face, as he stands unable to move, witnessing the slaughter taking place in front of him. Bacho reprimands Pavel for his inaction, and so Pavel heads towards some buildings in the opposite direction, the sounds of gunfire continuing to ring out. At the entrance to a building Pavel sees a dog, and clearly reluctant to shoot, he waves his rifle, encouraging the dog to flee. But the dog instead stands and looks at him, not scared but interested. There is a moment, and then the dog makes a small bark, and, almost as an unthinking reaction, Pavel fires. Then the dog is heard whining, and as Pavel moves nearer, it is clear the animal has been wounded, but not fatally. Pavel leans over the dog, and looks like he's about to say something. But then another shot is heard, and the dog's whining ceases, and it is revealed Bacho has deliv-

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ered the fatal shot. Bacho storms up to Pavel and says, "Don't let them suffer". He then walks off telling Pavel to bring the dog's corpse to the truck. There's another close-up on Pavel's face, as the sounds of dogs barking and shots firing continue.

Significant throughout this sequence, and the rest of this narrative that continues for much of this episode, is that the actual moments of the deaths of the dogs are absent from the screen. While dogs' corpses are sometimes in frame, these are always at a distance and incidental to the action taking place in the foreground. While the dog that Pavel shoots is depicted while alive but injured, the animal disappears from representation once dead. As such *Chernobyl*'s representational strategies depict the horror of what is taking place while negotiating the boundaries of what human audiences might find acceptable. Discussing this on the *Chernobyl Podcast*, Mazin says, "People probably think I've abused them with this episode" ("The Happiness of All Mankind"). He goes on to discuss a scene that was drawn from historical record and was shot, but which in the end was not included for broadcast. This involves the subsequent dumping of dogs' corpses into a pit, which are then covered in concrete in order to prevent radiation leakage. In the broadcast version all of the dogs are dead, but the deleted scene showed that one dog was mistakenly still conscious. Wanting to ensure the animal wasn't buried alive in the concrete, Bacho searches for ammunition, but the three liquidators realise they have run out of bullets. They thus have no option but to pour the concrete onto the living dog alongside the corpses. Mazin justifies excluding this scene:

> You don't want to cross a line where you feel like you're excited about upsetting people, because we're not. You know, once we kind of got out of Pavel's head... I mostly want people to watch this and feel what Pavel feels (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "The Happiness of All Mankind").

Mazin here makes clear that his aim in this narrative is not to encourage concern for the hundreds of slaughtered dogs, but instead for audiences to 'feel what Pavel feels'. The anthropocentric nature of the narrative here aligns with how pets such as dogs are entrapped within human-centred understandings of the function and purpose of animals. Yi-Fu Tuan notes that what "produces" the pet is a combination of "dominance" and "affection" (1984: 2). While humans clearly have affection for the animals they categorise as 'pets', "The dangers for contemporary dogs are real" (McHugh 2004: 9). Most indicative of this is humans' insistence on their ability to decide when animals such as pets can die, usually via the process human cultures sanitise through terms such as 'putting to sleep'. Pets are "expendable individuals that can be killed en masse at human will – or even whim" (Palmer 2006: 171). Pavel's narrative is one in which he comes to realise the truth of this fact, and it explores the impact upon him not only as he accepts this, but also as he becomes part of the process that engages in death on this scale. Yet *Chernobyl* indicates no interest in the implications of this for the animals themselves. None of the dogs are named, none appear outside of the moment of their slaughter. While for audiences seeing a process by which animals are killed is undoubtedly difficult to view, the programme prioritises empathy with Pavel's comparable horror rather than engagement with the dogs whose deaths propel the story. On offer is a form of audience-character human kinship central to anthropocentric narrative, with animals reduced to representational resources depicted only inasmuch as they enable the human-centred story to be told.

Later in the episode Pavel, Bacho and Garo are having their lunch break, sitting outside some abandoned buildings, eating sausage and drinking vodka. Garo reads out what is written on a banner hanging forlornly off an abandoned nearby community centre; 'The happiness of all mankind'. Sagal reflects on the phrase that, "Certain lies have to be shouted" (*Chernobyl Podcast* "The Happiness of All Mankind"). This sequence underscores the key theme Mazin asserts is *Chernobyl*'s purpose; to highlight how societies lie to themselves, and the difficulties individuals face when standing up those lies. The story of Pavel serves to demonstrate not only how people are ensnared within the stories nations tell about themselves, but also how through repetition those aspects that might at first seem unconscionable become routine. After all, Pavel is later shown much more methodically scouring the abandoned town for animals to kill, and in his final scene he is shown with Bacho and Garo walking home in the dusk, now clearly one of them.

Chernobyl aims to skewer the empty sloganeering of phrases such as 'the happiness of all mankind', yet its critique merely troubles this particular use of this phrase, rather than the fundamental notion it encapsulates. Just as human cultures routinely put to death billions of animals per year, so *Chernobyl* representationally puts to death multiple dogs, all in the service of telling a story anthropocentric in its focus. Like the cat in Legasov's apartment, and the cow in the old woman's barn, these animals appear in the programme only

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inasmuch as they are necessary to tell the human-centred story. The programme makes a distinction between the significance it places upon different kinds of death, in which the mere threat to life for humans is offered as a narrative concern, while the actual death of animals is depicted fleetingly and is seen as meaningful only where it impacts upon humans. The most fundamental structuring principles of the notion of 'the happiness of all mankind' is the assumption that mankind's happiness is of more significance than that of other beings. To reshape a historical moment of human-animal interaction resulting in the deaths of hundreds of dogs into a story in which only the impacts upon humans matter is anthropocentric storytelling in which animals are narrative resources and nothing more.

6. "THE COST OF LIES": ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

To outline *Chernobyl*'s anthropocentric narrative is not to suggest that it is singular or particular in this discourse. The potency of the animal turn is one that responds to the normalisation of anthropocentrism, and a television series such as *Chernobyl* is merely indicative of the human-centred nature of much storytelling. Yet there is also a piquancy here, given the event called 'Chernobyl' is one within which thousands of animals were, and continue to be, enmeshed. Anthropocentric narrative isn't therefore merely a prioritising of the human experience, it is also a denial of non-human alternatives, and a normalisation of the former through the very disavowal of the latter. Dominic Pettman defines human cultures as predicated on an all-powerful error, which "is to mistake the perception of our reflection for reality" (2011: 21). As a drama committed to seriousness *Chernobyl* offers up a realist tale legitimised by the science it draws on for evidence, with Mazin's contributions on the *Chernobyl* Podcast reinforcing this. In disavowing the multiple ways in which 'Chernobyl' has been understood by a variety of approaches the programme partakes in the dominant anthropocentric 'error'.

Television Studies, too, engages in this error. Aligning itself with the human-centric conventions of storytelling, it makes sense of the texts it explores through a human lens. When Jason Mittell reveals his recurring analytical question is "how does this text work?' (2015: 4), the right answer is always likely to be, 'anthropocentrically'. Including animals within analytical frameworks has significant implications for the study of television and its storytelling, by making explicit the processes by which a human viewing position is offered and adopted. What does it mean to tell a story, if that story is not about, or for, humans? What are the implications for animals of human cultures' propensity to form narratives with humans as their site of understanding, especially when – as with *Chernobyl* – what is being narrativised is of immediate concern to a wide range of beings?

It is possible to imagine plenty of alternative versions of *Chernobyl* that could have been made. These could have traced the consequences of the accident on non-humans, whether these are pets massacred in the clear-up operation, or wildlife currently living in the exclusion zone. Approaches under the animal turn have sought to engage in mapping more permeable species boundaries' by "locating narrative as a zone of integration" (McHugh 2011: 2). This is seen to be important given the consequences of human actions on non-human beings, where industrialised meat production, mass extinctions and habitat loss are results of institutionalised and normalised anthropocentrism. Acknowledging and critiquing anthropocentric narrative matters then, not because of some reductive goal of defining a definitive historical truth than can be called 'Chernobyl'; it matters because stories which say that only humans matter are ones that help enable social power structures under which non-humans suffer. Mazin states that his primary motivation for making *Chernobyl* was to examine the cost of lies, but his topic – summarised in the series' opening line – may perhaps be more productively reframed: what is the cost *for animals* of lies *told by humans*?

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