

Psychological Terror and Exploitation in Craig Mazin's *Chernobyl* (2019) TV Series: A Marxist Literary Criticism

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi teror psikologis dan eksploitasi tenaga kerja dalam serial *Chernobyl* (2019). Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan teoritis Marxis, khususnya melalui perspektif Louis Althusser dengan konsep Aparatus Ideologis Negara (ISA) dan Aparatus Represif Negara (RSA). Penelitian ini menerapkan metode analisis isi terhadap lima episode, yaitu: '1:23:45', 'Please Remain Calm', 'Open Wide, O Earth', 'The Happiness of All Mankind', dan 'Vichnaya Pripyat'. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemerintah Soviet dalam serial *Chernobyl* menggunakan teror psikologis melalui pengawasan ketat, manipulasi informasi, dan tekanan ideologis untuk memaksakan kepatuhan. Adegan seperti kematian Sitnikov dan tugas-tugas berbahaya yang dijalankan oleh para penyelam menggambarkan bagaimana negara membungkus eksploitasi dalam narasi kepahlawanan. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa intervensi terhadap ilmuwan seperti Legasov dan Khomyuk merupakan bentuk kontrol negara terhadap kebenaran. Serial *Chernobyl* berfungsi sebagai kritik terhadap sistem otoriter yang mempertahankan kekuasaan melalui kebohongan, ketakutan, dan kekerasan, serta menunjukkan keberlangsungan mekanisme kontrol serupa dalam masyarakat modern. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa teror psikologis tetap menjadi cara yang efektif untuk mengawasi kelas pekerja dan mempertahankan hegemoni ideologis di era kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Teror psikologis; eksploitasi; althusser; aparatus ideologis negara; aparatus represif negara

Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of psychological terror and labor exploitation in *Chernobyl* (2019). This study adopted a Marxist theoretical approach, following Althusser's perspective with the concept of the State Ideological Apparatus (SIA) and the State Repressive Apparatus (SRA). The research conducted content analysis on five episodes: '1:23:45', 'Please Remain Calm', 'Open Wide, O Earth', 'The Happiness of All Mankind', and 'Vichnaya Pripyat'. The study findings indicate that the Soviet government in the *Chernobyl* TV series used psychological terror through strict surveillance, information manipulation, and ideological pressure to impose compliance. Scenes such as Sitnikov's death and the dangerous tasks performed by the divers depict how the state packaged exploitation within a narrative of heroism. The study also shows that interventions against scientists like Legasov and Khomyuk were a means of state control over truth. The *Chernobyl* TV series serves as a critique of authoritarian systems that maintain control through deception, fear, and violence, suggesting that psychological terror remains a straightforward means of monitoring workers and maintaining ideological hegemony in the modern era.

Keywords: Psychological terror; exploitation; althusser; state ideological apparatus; state repressive apparatus

INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world, including Indonesia, still use psychological terror and censorship as tools to maintain power. This fear-based governance strategy is reflected in media control, surveillance of society, and repression of opposition, creating a climate of fear and suppressing voices of resistance (Setiawan, 2023). In this context, workers often become victims of exploitation, forced to work in dangerous and unfair conditions without the freedom to voice their grievances. This phenomenon has drawn attention in popular culture studies, particularly

in narrative representations of authoritarian systems and the role of terror in maintaining the status quo.

The HBO series *Chernobyl* serves as a powerful reflection of totalitarian power practices through its portrayal of the 1986 nuclear disaster in Ukraine. The series not only highlights the explosion itself but also depicts the systemic failures and authoritarian power structures that exacerbated the tragedy. In the story, it becomes clear that psychological terror is just as deadly as the spreading radiation (Higginbotham, 2019). Fear, information manipulation, and the glorification of

sacrifice serve as tools of domination used by the Soviet government to suppress and control its people.

Through a Marxist literary criticism approach, particularly Louis Althusser's ideas on the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), this study highlights how the state maintains power through ideological and repressive institutions. In the *Chernobyl* series, these mechanisms are manifested in strict surveillance, information censorship, and propaganda that marginalize the working class. They are forced to accept dangerous working conditions as a form of devotion to the state (Althusser, 1971). This representation depicts the exploitation of the working class as a result of strong ideological control.

Based on this background, the main issue raised in this study is how psychological terror is represented in the *Chernobyl* series and how it contributes to the exploitation of the working class. Terror is no longer merely a symbol of power but has become an operational mechanism for subjugating the lower classes. The analysis focuses on how authoritarian systems create narratives of sacrifice, loyalty, and obedience as justifications for exploiting labor in the name of national stability.

This study uses content analysis with a Marxist literary criticism approach. The main data consists of dialogues and visual scenes from the first three episodes of the series: "1:23:45," "Please Remain Calm," and "Open Wide, O Earth." These episodes were selected because they contain the clearest representations of state terror, repression, and the subordination of the working class. Episodes 4 and 5 are excluded as they shift focus toward disaster aftermath and political trials, which fall outside the primary scope of this study. This approach allows the researcher to uncover the relationship between ideology, power, and forced labor practices hidden within the series' narrative.

The main objective of this study is to reveal how psychological terror is represented in the *Chernobyl* series and how this representation shows a direct relationship between fear and the exploitation of the working class. This study also aims to show that repressive practices are not only historical but also remain relevant in contemporary discourses of power that utilize terror as a tool of social control (Eagleton, 1991).

In the literature review, previous studies have extensively discussed narrative aspects (Garcia, 2021), political discourse (Donstrup, 2020), and psychoanalysis (Putri, 2022). However, very few have highlighted the relationship between terror and class exploitation from a Marxist perspective, particularly in the context of ISA and RSA. Thus, this study fills this gap by examining how ideological and repressive state apparatuses collaborate in subjugating the working class through fear strategies.

Althusser's theory of ISA and RSA is the main framework for this study. Althusser explains that the state maintains its dominance not only through direct violence (RSA), such as the police and military, but also through ideological institutions (ISA), such as the media and education (Althusser, 1971). In the *Chernobyl* series, a combination of these two apparatuses is used to spread fear and ensure workers' obedience to exploitative power structures.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to literary studies and media studies by revealing how historical fiction narratives reflect oppressive social structures. Furthermore, these findings can provide new insights into how psychological terror as a form of ideological power operates not only in historical contexts but also in contemporary societies, particularly in authoritarian regimes that still exist today.

By focusing on class exploitation through terror, this research is expected to be an important study in deconstructing dominant narratives that glorify the sacrifice of the people for the sake of the state. The *Chernobyl* series demonstrates that art can serve as a medium for critiquing oppressive systems. This research offers a critical reflection on the use of terror to maintain power. It serves as a call to awareness of the importance of dismantling ideological hegemony in contemporary popular culture.

METHOD

This study employs content analysis to examine the representation of psychological terror and labor exploitation in the *Chernobyl* (2019) TV series. The primary data source in this research is the excerpts spoken by characters within the narrative, as it reveals the ideological messaging, coercive undertones, and psychological mechanisms at play. Visual scenes and images are used as supporting material to strengthen the interpretation of the meaning conveyed through the dialogue. The analysis focuses on identifying how fear operates as a tool of state control and how ideology shapes class subordination.

The episodes analyzed are Episode 1 ("1:23:45"), Episode 2 (Please Remain Calm), Episode 3 (Open Wide, O Earth), Episode 4 (The Happiness of All Mankind) and Episode 5 (Vichnaya Pamyat). These five episodes were selected because they contain key narrative moments that illustrate the dynamics of psychological repression and systemic labor exploitation under Soviet authoritarianism. This research is framed within Marxist literary criticism, particularly drawing on Louis Althusser's concepts of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). The study identifies and interprets dialogues and scenes that reflect how the Soviet state

exerts control, manipulates ideology, and maintains dominance through both fear and coercion embedded in its institutional structures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section serves as the main space for analysis to reveal how the *Chernobyl* TV Series (2019) represents psychological terror as a tool of state power through Louis Althusser's concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA). The series depicts control that is not only present in the form of physical repression, but also through ideology embedded in the minds of the people. Using a Marxist literary criticism approach, this analysis highlights how fear, censorship, and information manipulation create compliance that pressures the working class to submit and sacrifice without resistance. Through key scenes and dialogues, *Chernobyl* demonstrates that authoritarian power operates not only through violence but also through the internalization of ideology and fear.

Psychological Terror as an Althusserian Mechanism of Ideological and Repressive State Control

Chernobyl vividly illustrates how psychological terror arises from the fusion of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA), which enforce control through intimidation, and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which shape beliefs and identities. In the Soviet Union's authoritarian structure, these mechanisms foster a culture of silence, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Drawing on the legacy of Stalinist purges, surveillance, and censorship, the series shows how resistance becomes nearly unthinkable, as citizens are conditioned to prioritize the state's image over personal truth (Althusser, 1971; Higginbotham, 2019).

Using Althusser's theory of interpellation, the series explores how individuals internalize state ideology, viewing obedience not as submission but as moral duty. Characters like scientists and workers suppress dissent to maintain the illusion of unity and infallibility. This internalized control blurs fear and loyalty, transforming psychological repression into normalized civic virtue. Even by the 1980s, remnants of Stalin-era tactics—surveillance, forced silence, and ideological coercion—persist, reinforcing authoritarian power by substituting truth with the illusion of a perfect state (Applebaum, 2003; Harrison, 2019; Champawat, 2024).

Psychological Terror Through Censorship and Fear

One of the main mechanisms used by the Soviet government to maintain its authoritarian control was the deliberate suppression of truth, accompanied by the deliberate spread of fear as a tool of power. Rather than

resorting to overt violence, the regime created an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty, where citizens implicitly understood that questioning the official narrative could lead to surveillance, exile, forced labor camps, or even execution (Harrison, 2019). This culture of fear fostered self-censorship, turning society into passive participants in the preservation of the state's ideological dominance. This is reflected in the episode "Please Remain Calm" when Valery Legasov tries to reveal the dangers of radiation but is pressured by Boris Shcherbina to follow the official narrative in order to prevent panic and maintain political stability.

Shcherbina: "Professor, if you have any concerns, feel free to address them with me later."

Legasov: "I cannot, I am sorry... There is- there's graphite on the ground".

Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:09:50-0:10:53)



Figure 1. The First Conflict Between Scientific Views and Political Views

Even scientists like Valery Legasov are not immune to censorship when exposing uncomfortable truths. His experience shows that suppression can occur even during internal discussions, not just public disclosures. Despite working in a supposedly scientific environment, Legasov faced intimidation both direct and indirect, while powerful political figures prioritized national security over truth. Their silent signals and cold stares conveyed a clear message: preserving the state's image is more important than scientific transparency. Speaking the truth, even with factual accuracy, was viewed as a threat to political stability and had to be silenced. This highlights how political pressure can compromise scientific integrity, even among those most trusted to reveal facts during critical moments.

Shcherbina: "Comrade General Secretary, I can assure you that Professor Legasov is mistaken. Bryukhanov reports that the reactor core is intact. And as for the radiation..."

Legasov: "Yes, 3,6 roentgens. Which, by the way, is not the equivalent of one chest x-ray, but rather 400 chest x-rays. That number has been bothering me for a different reason, however. It is also the maximum reading on low-

limit dosimeters. They gave us the number they had. I think the true number is much, much higher. If I am right, this fireman was holding the equivalent of four million chest x-rays in his hand."

Shcherbina: "Professor Legasov, there is no place for alarmist hysteria."

Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:10:32-0:12:05)

Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), commonly linked with physical coercion like violence or imprisonment, also functions psychologically. As Louis Althusser suggests, the mere presence of surveillance and subtle intimidation can suppress dissent and critical thought. The constant awareness of being watched or the threat of state action cultivates internalized fear, making individuals comply without the need for direct force. This psychological control becomes a potent tool of domination, where fear replaces open repression, and silence is maintained not by physical punishment but by the invisible weight of perceived authority and the anticipation of possible consequences.

(Shcherbina hinted that someone was following them)

Legasov: "I have seen them before."

Shcherbina: "Now you know why I wanted to take a walk. We can presume the work site is bugged. And our rooms, even our bathrooms. They have been here the whole time. However, if we are seeing them out in the open now, it is because they want us to know."

Episode 3 "Open Wide, O Earth" (0:16:17-0:16:56)



Figure 2. Consciously Watched: The Politics of Surveillance (1)

Two couples who run out to be KGB spies follow Legasov and Shcherbina on their night walk.

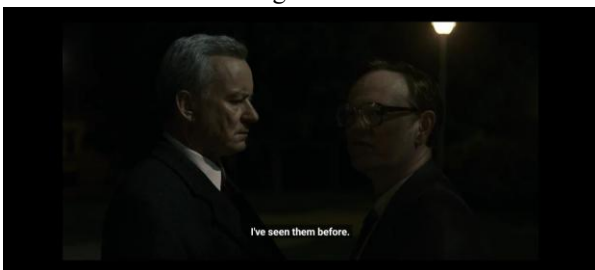


Figure 3. Consciously Watched: The Politics of Surveillance (2)

In *Chernobyl*, surveillance is deliberately visible, as seen when Legasov and Shcherbina are openly followed by state agents, a tactic designed to instill fear without confrontation. This psychological pressure leads to self-censorship, reflecting how the Soviet regime enforced obedience through internalized fear rather than constant physical repression. The characters begin to regulate their behavior, embodying Althusser's concept of interpellation, where individuals internalize state ideology and become self-policing subjects. This dynamic is further illustrated in Episode 3, when Khomyuk defies surveillance to uncover the truth, culminating in her defiant declaration, "I will tell everyone," a rare moment of resistance against a system built on fear and ideological control.

Khomyuk: "People are going to hear about this."

The nurse: "Wait, you do not understand."

The man: "What is everyone gonna hear?"

Khomyuk: "I am with the official Chernobyl Commission, and Valey Legasov has authorized me. You can check this. My name is Ulana--"

The man: "We know who you are. What is everyone going to hear?"

Episode 3 "Open Wide, O Earth" (0:44:48-0:45:16)



Figure 4. The Truth That Was not Meant to be Heard

The tension intensifies when a KGB officer confronts Khomyuk after her defiant declaration. His calm yet threatening question, "What will everyone hear?" reveals the state's omnipresent surveillance and the danger tied to speaking out. By asserting, "We know who you are," the officer conveys that Khomyuk's actions are already monitored, leaving no room for anonymity or dissent. The repeated question serves as a veiled warning that truth-telling is punishable, and the state decides who may speak and what may be heard.

This psychological control escalates when Khomyuk is later arrested and interrogated by the KGB. Her detainment reflects the regime's practice of using intimidation to control information flow. Even Legasov's concern is brushed aside by Comrade Charkov, who frames her arrest as a method of filtering information, emphasizing that knowledge in the Soviet system is not merely managed but weaponized. The sequence reinforces

how surveillance and repression are used to maintain ideological dominance.

Legasov: "My Associate was arrested last night. I mean no disrespect, but I was wondering if you could tell me why."

Comrade Charkov: "I do not know who you are talking about."

Legasov: "The KGB arrested her. You are the first deputy chairman of the KGB."

Comrade Charkov: "That is why I do not have to bother with arresting people anymore."

Legasov: "But you are bothering with having us followed."

Comrade Charkov: "Comrade, I know you have heard the stories about us. When I hear them, I am shocked. However, we are not what people say. Yes, people are following you. They are watching me too. The KGB is a circle of accountability. Nothing more."

Legasov: "You know the work we are doing here, you really do not trust us?"

Comrade Charkov: "Of course I do. However, you know the old Russian proverb: Trust, but verify."

Episode 3 "Open Wide, O Earth" (0:49:39-0:50:47)



Figure 5. The First Deputy Chairman of the KGB

In *Chernobyl* (2019), psychological terror operates as a systemic mechanism of control, where surveillance is not an aberration but the essence of governance. The KGB's power lies not in overt violence but in its omnipresent threat, cloaked in bureaucratic normalcy that renders repression routine and fear rational. This climate of fear compels citizens and scientists alike to self-censor, internalizing state pressure. As Althusser theorizes, such ideological state apparatuses sustain power not just through force but through emotional and psychological regulation. Consequently, figures like Khomyuk and Legasov are not silenced by direct threats, but by the pervasive fear of potential punishment—an equally effective form of suppression.

The Manipulation of Information to Sustain Control

The psychological impact of this suppression becomes evident when the first responders and workers at the

Chernobyl plant are left unaware of the true dangers of radiation, and it all happened in Episode 1 "1:23:45".

Dyatlov: "He is delusional..."

Akimov: "His face..." (began to be afraid)

Dyatlov: "Ruptured condenser lines, the feedwater is mildly contaminated, he will be fine, I have seen worse."

Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:23:24-0:23:30)



Figure 6. Dyatlov Covered Up the Real Information

A worker reported to Dyatlov that he had witnessed the explosion and its effects, including radiation, but Dyatlov denied it. Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:23:24 - 0:23:30).

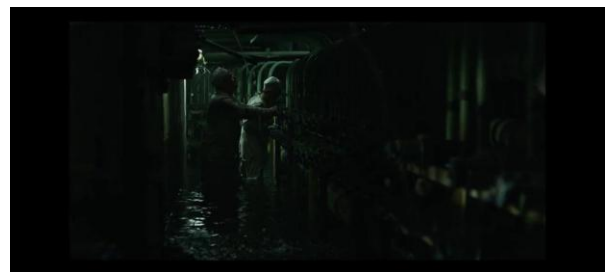


Figure 7. Akimov and Toptunov Fix the Water Valve

Dyatlov still ordered Akimov and Toptunov to open the water valve, despite knowing it was a location with extremely high radiation levels. Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:47:56 - 0:49:14).



Figure 8. Firefighter Who Touched Graphite Ended Up Burning His Hand

The firefighters had already begun to feel the effects of the graphite they were holding, and their hands were burning. Although Vasily Ignatenko, the firefighter, felt something was strange, he was forced to stay focused on putting out the fire. Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:19:26-0:19:47).

In *Chernobyl*, Figures 6 and 7 depict how workers like Akimov and Toptunov are exposed to lethal radiation due

to Dyatlov's deliberate concealment of the explosion's severity. Despite knowing the dangers, Dyatlov withholds the truth to maintain authority and avoid panic, forcing subordinates to act unthinkingly in obedience. Akimov and Toptunov's descent into the radioactive basement—fully aware of the fatal consequences—demonstrates how authoritarian systems enforce control through coercion and ideological pressure, turning sacrifice into duty and human lives into expendable resources.

This pattern of misinformation continues with the firefighters in Figure 8, who unknowingly walk into a radioactive zone without proper protection, becoming victims of the state's failure to communicate. Vasily Ignatenko, despite sensing danger, is bound by orders he cannot question. Similarly, in Episode 2, scientist Khomyuk faces threats for seeking the truth, as officials prioritize public calm over addressing the actual crisis. Together, these scenes expose how authoritarian regimes suppress information and endanger lives in the name of control and political stability.

Deputy Secretary of Minsk: "I must tell you, this is why no one likes scientists. When we have a disease to cure, where are they? However, there is no problem; they are everywhere, spreading fear."

Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:21:54-0:22:07)

From Althusser's perspective, the Soviet government's response to the Chernobyl disaster exemplifies how Ideological State Apparatuses operate by shaping perception rather than using direct violence. By withholding accurate information about radiation and delaying preventive measures like iodine distribution, the state maintained a false sense of security to preserve its legitimacy. As Champawat (2024) explains, this manipulation dulled public awareness and discouraged critical thinking, reinforcing passive acceptance of authority. Over time, such denial bred helplessness and disorientation, causing citizens to distrust their judgment and surrender autonomy to the state—thus sustaining a cycle of authoritarian control through psychological conditioning and the normalization of submission.

After explaining what happened in Chernobyl, the deputy secretary of Minsk still did not believe Khomyuk, even though she was a nuclear physicist.

Deputy Secretary of Minsk: "There has been an accident at Chernobyl, but I have been assured there is no problem."

Khomyuk: "I am telling you that there is."

Deputy: "I prefer my opinion to yours."

Khomyuk: "I am a nuclear physicist. Before you were deputy secretary, you worked in a shoe factory."

Deputy: "Yes, I worked in a shoe factory, and now I am in charge of the workers of the world."

Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:22:25-0:22:52)

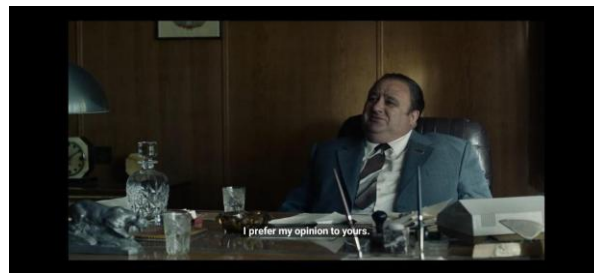


Figure 9. Rejection of the Opinion of The Deputy Secretary of Minsk

The scene reveals the suppression of academic freedom in authoritarian regimes, where truth is manipulated and dissent is punished. Khomyuk's dilemma, which risks safety to reveal the truth, reflects the deep psychological and ethical toll on individuals forced to choose between integrity and survival under systemic control and fear.

Manipulation of Information Through Narratives of Collective Interest is prominently demonstrated in an extended dialogue between Legasov, Khomyuk, and Shcherbina in Episode 5.

"We can make a deal with the KGB... they secretly allow us to repair the remaining reactors."

The line reflects authoritarian pragmatism, where truth is strategically controlled and concealment framed as a duty to national stability. Legasov faces a moral dilemma: speak out or stay silent, revealing the emotional paralysis under a regime that values image over integrity and order over public safety..

"Are you suggesting that Legasov humiliate a nation that is obsessed with not being humiliated?"

This line captures the Soviet Union's fragile ego, revealing how nationalism becomes an ideological tool to suppress dissent. Terms like "humiliate" and "obsessed" show that the state functions not just administratively but ideologically, prioritizing national pride over truth. Shcherbina's response reflects how preserving the state's image overrides moral responsibility, even in the face of disaster. Despite recognizing systemic failures, he defends the regime's narrative, illustrating how hegemonic power is maintained not by reason or consent, but through emotional loyalty and enforced conformity to ideology.

"They will target your family, your friends... when it comes to the lives of people you care about, your moral standing will be meaningless."

This scene illustrates the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) at work through subtle yet powerful psychological intimidation. Though no direct threat is made, the coercion lies in the unspoken consequences anchored in personal ties and fear for loved ones, which pressure individuals into self-censorship. Althusser's theory is embodied here, as the RSA operates not through overt violence, but through the lingering fear of repression that makes silence appear as the only safe choice. In such an environment, obedience is not demanded outright; it is internalized.

Moreover, the Soviet state's manipulation of language and meaning reveals how ideology is enforced not only politically, but emotionally. Phrases like "shame the nation" and "agreement with the KGB" reframe truth-telling as betrayal and silence as patriotism, blurring moral boundaries. *Chernobyl* thus exposes how authoritarian regimes maintain power by controlling information and instilling fear not just of punishment, but of knowledge itself. The resulting culture of fear leads to the sacrifice of truth, health, and lives, all to preserve the illusion of order and ideological supremacy.

Psychological Terror Leads to the Exploitation of the Working Class

Althusser's theory explains how Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses sustain ruling class dominance by shaping workers' beliefs. In *Chernobyl*, this is shown through psychological coercion, where fear replaces violence, compelling workers to accept dangerous tasks as a patriotic duty. Resistance is discouraged, and suffering is reframed as virtue. Historically, the Soviet Union employed similar tactics, such as gulag labor and Stakhanovism, to exploit labor under the guise of socialism and national pride (Applebaum, 2003). The series critiques this manipulation, revealing how fear and ideology reinforce obedience, suppress dissent, and maintain authoritarian power through internalized control rather than overt force.

Fear as a Tool to Enforce Labor Exploitation

In episode 1 ("1:23:45"), High Official Engineer Fomin and Plant Director Bryukhanov refuse to acknowledge that Reactor 4 has exploded. Despite clear evidence, the workers report an explosion and visible graphite fragments, and they insist on verifying the situation firsthand. Sitnikov, a mid-level engineer, is ordered to climb to the roof and look directly into the reactor.

Formin: "Go to the vent block roof and report back what you see."

Toptunov: "No."

Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:47:04-0:47:06)



Figure 10. Sitnikov's Refusal

Toptunov shook his head, indicating his disagreement with replacing Dyatlov's task of personally inspecting the RMBK roof, where the radiation level was significantly higher than elsewhere.

Toptunov: "No, I will not do that."

Bryukhanov: "Of course you will."

Episode 1 "1:23:45" (0:47:11-0:47:14)



Figure 11. Refusal is not an Option

Sitnikov's refusal to follow orders stems from his understanding of the deadly effects of radiation exposure, heightened by witnessing his superior already suffering from acute symptoms without direct contact with the reactor. His fear is rational and grounded in the visible consequences around him. However, the presence of armed guards accompanying him reinforces that refusal is not an option, turning this moment into a stark example of psychological coercion. This scene illustrates how authoritarian regimes exploit labor through fear, disguising forced compliance as duty, while using the silent threat of violence to suppress autonomy and extract obedience under extreme duress.

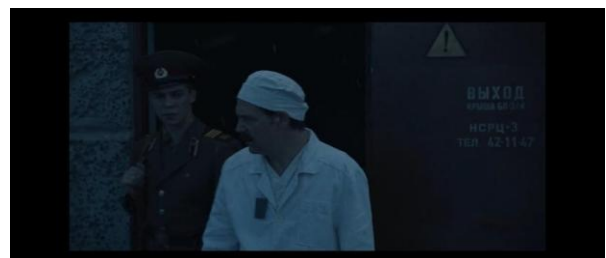


Figure 12. Fear Causing Labor Exploitation

Toptunov was forced to go up to the reactor building to check with his own eyes that the reactor had exploded,

accompanied by officers, so that he would not escape. Episode 1 “1:23:45” (0:49:31 - 0:49:43).

Sitnikov’s experience exemplifies the systemic exploitation inherent in authoritarian socialism, where the state demands total obedience by framing self-sacrifice as a patriotic duty. In this structure, workers are stripped of autonomy and reduced to tools for state preservation, coerced into dangerous tasks under the illusion of loyalty. Soviet ideology reinforces this manipulation by glorifying the working class as heroic, using education, media, and cultural narratives to equate obedience with virtue (Dunlop, 2017). This is further illustrated in Episode 3, where Tula miners face threats from officials, highlighting how fear and ideological conditioning merge to transform individual suffering into a celebrated act of national service.

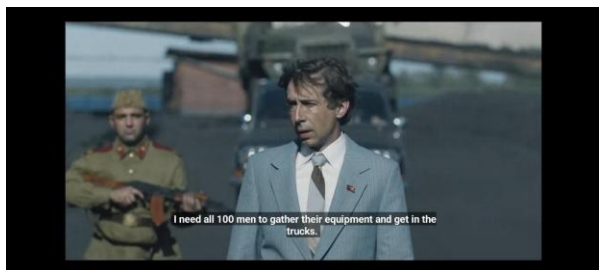


Figure 13. Evidence of the Powerlessness of Workers Because of the RSA

The Soviet Minister of the Coal Industry travels to Tula with the purpose of recruiting a group of miners for a highly dangerous yet vital task: excavating a tunnel beneath Reactor 4 in an effort to contain the escalating crisis and prevent a potential thermal explosion that could worsen the disaster significantly. Episode 3 “Open Wide, O Earth” (0:20:35 - 0:22:29).

The recruitment of the miners starkly illustrates the power imbalance between the state and its citizens, where patriotic rhetoric is used to conceal coercion. Though framed as a noble duty to save the Soviet Union, the presence of armed soldiers reveals that refusal is not truly an option, making consent merely performative. This moment exemplifies Althusser’s Repressive State Apparatus, as the threat of force secures labor compliance. The miners, led by Glukhov, quickly recognize the deception. When the minister cannot deny that the mission is fatal, it becomes clear that their participation is driven not by loyalty, but by fear of state punishment.

The Cycle of Fear and Powerlessness in the Working Class

In Episode 3 of *Chernobyl*, the miners face brutal, inhumane conditions upon arrival at the disaster site. Forced to work in extreme underground heat without basic

cooling systems, they strip naked out of necessity, not choice. When they request proper equipment, their appeals are flatly rejected, without explanation. Exposed to high radiation levels, their safety is ignored entirely. This reflects the regime’s view of laborers as expendable tools rather than human beings, sacrificing their well-being for state stability and ideological pride, with no regard for dignity, protection, or basic working conditions.

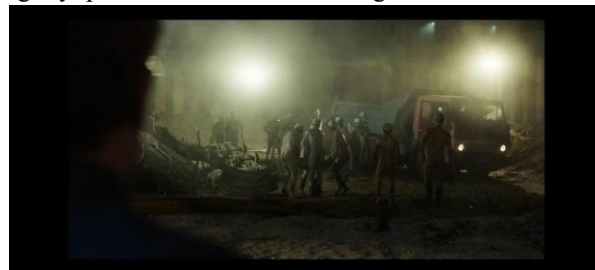


Figure 14. Dehumanization of Labor – *Miners of Chernobyl*

The workers removed their clothes because they felt too hot, and their superiors had not approved their request—episode 3 “Open Wide, O Earth” (0:40:19 - 0:40:42).

In *Chernobyl*, the miners’ silent compliance, despite no direct threats, reveals internalized fear and learned helplessness under authoritarian rule. Their obedience stems from psychological conditioning that renders resistance futile and frames sacrifice as heroism. This reflects how the regime embeds control through ideology rather than violence. Dyatlov similarly embodies this internalized submission, choosing state secrecy over personal benefit due to deep belief in the regime’s authority. As a product of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus, he, like the miners, demonstrates how authoritarian power endures through ingrained loyalty, where obedience is not merely enforced but morally justified.

His belief that,

“Well, the state must protect its secrets, comrade. Do you dare suggest otherwise? You think the right question will get you the truth? There is no truth. Ask the bosses whatever you want and you will get the lie.”

In *Chernobyl*, personal ethics are gradually overridden by ideological conditioning, as seen in Episode 5 through Pavel, a young soldier ordered to kill abandoned pets. Though framed as a public safety measure, the task causes him visible moral distress, revealing the tension between empathy and state-imposed duty. Under military hierarchy and pressure, Pavel suppresses his conscience, demonstrating how authoritarian systems subordinate individual morality to institutional obedience, replacing personal judgment with loyalty to the regime.

This internalized compliance, shaped by Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus, reframes obedience as virtue and dissent as betrayal. Even Bacho, Pavel's superior, operates within these constraints, reinforcing submission as the ethical norm. The regime's dehumanizing control becomes even more evident in the "biorobot" scenes, where conscripted soldiers replace failed machines to clear radioactive debris with minimal protection. These scenes expose the systemic exploitation of the working class, where human lives are treated as expendable in the service of the state's image, masked by appeals to necessity and patriotic duty.

"These are the most important 90 seconds of your life. Remember your duty. Then carry it out."

Reduce human existence to momentary utility, farming self-endangerment as a noble sacrifice for the state's reputation.

The soldiers tasked with removing radioactive debris receive only 800 rubles and a symbolic title. However, they respond with patriotic pride, "I serve the Soviet Union," revealing how deeply ideology is internalized under authoritarian rule. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) operates here through nationalistic narratives that glorify sacrifice and mask exploitation as heroism. Shcherbina's chilling request to Gorbachev, "Comrade, let me kill your people," exposes a system that values global image over human life. These actions are not freely chosen but shaped by long-term ideological conditioning through militarism, education, and propaganda. The regime's control combines both ideological and repressive mechanisms, creating obedient subjects who act under pressure and internalized duty. This is exemplified in the near-suicidal mission of Alexei Ananenko, Valery Bezpалov, and Boris Baranov, plant workers sent into a flooded radioactive basement. Their story reflects how authoritarian power treats individuals as expendable instruments to contain disaster and preserve state authority.



Figure 16. "The Diver of *Chernobyl*"

These Divers of Chernobyl will be prepared to explore the water valves. Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:59:20).

The task is framed as heroic self-sacrifice for the Soviet Union. However, in reality, they are placed in an

impossible situation between accepting and dying or refusing and facing punishment.

Before the divers were selected, Shcherbina gave a speech. The workers: "Why should we do this? For what? 400 rubles?"

Shcherbina: "You will do it because it must be done. You will do it because nobody else can. Moreover, if you do not, millions will die. If you tell me that is not enough, I will not believe you. That is what has always set our people apart—a thousand years of sacrifice in our veins. Moreover, every generation must know its suffering. I spit on the people who did this, and I curse the price I have to pay. However, I am making my peace with it, and now you make yours. Moreover, go into that water. Because it must be done."

Episode 2 "Please Remain Calm" (0:56:39-0:57:28)



Figure 17. Shcherbina's Speech

The diver scene in *Chernobyl* powerfully illustrates how the Soviet regime manipulates ideology to disguise coercion as heroism. Faced with a deadly mission, the workers are subjected to patriotic rhetoric and implicit pressure that frames refusal as dishonor. Decades of indoctrination through education, propaganda, and glorification of sacrifice have conditioned them to equate obedience with virtue. Fear of social shame outweighs fear of death, and personal survival is subordinated to ideological duty. As Althusser's theory suggests, the Ideological State Apparatus creates subjects who internalize state values, turning individuals into instruments of control under the illusion of voluntary sacrifice.



Figure 18. Sacrifice Made, Gratitude Hollow

The divers' return sparked cheers and celebration, briefly overshadowing the deadly risk they faced in completing their life-threatening mission—episode 3 "Open Wide, O Earth" (0:04:54).

Though the mission ends in success and the divers survive, *Chernobyl* avoids glorifying their sacrifice, instead highlighting the unsettling reality of how authoritarian systems extract loyalty through psychological control. Viewed through Althusser's lens, the scene exemplifies the intertwining of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses: the ISA conditions workers to equate obedience with virtue. At the same time, the RSA enforces consequences for dissent. The normalization of self-sacrifice as patriotism masks systemic exploitation, revealing how such regimes maintain power not just through force, but by shaping individuals to internalize their subjugation in the service of the state.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Chernobyl* (2019) powerfully illustrates the Soviet regime's control through Althusser's concepts of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, where psychological terror and internalized obedience replace overt violence. The series reveals how fear, censorship, and propaganda suppress dissent and glorify sacrifice as duty. Characters like Sitnikov and the divers exemplify coerced heroism, while Legasov and Khomyuk demonstrate how ideological pressure enforces loyalty. The show critiques authoritarian systems that value political power over human life. Future research should explore similar mechanisms in other narratives, using frameworks like Foucault's surveillance or Gramsci's cultural hegemony across diverse media and political settings.

SUGGESTION

This study recommends that literary analysis pay greater attention to ideological and repressive power mechanisms in popular culture, as seen in the *Chernobyl* (2019) series. Psychological terror and labor exploitation occur not only through physical force but also via internalized ideology shaped by media, education, and state symbols. Althusser's Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) functions psychologically through surveillance and subtle intimidation that fosters fear-based compliance. Practically, educators and policymakers must challenge hegemonic narratives that sustain injustice. Theoretically, Marxist-Althusserian approaches can be expanded through intersectionality or post-Marxism. Future research should explore similar representations across modern and cross-cultural contexts.

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