





Voices from Chernobyl

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La Huit presents
A Red Lion production

A film by Pol Cruchten
adapted from the book by Svetlana Alexievich
Nobel Prize in Literature 2015



Luxembourg-Austria / 2016 / color / 86' / 1:55 / 5.1

Voices from Chernobyl



SYNOPSIS

This film does not deal with Chernobyl, but rather with the world of Chernobyl, about which we know very little.

Eyewitness reports have survived: scientists, teachers, journalists, couples, children...

They tell of their old daily lives, then of the catastrophe.

Their voices form a long, terrible but necessary supplication which traverses borders and stimulates us to question our status quo.

INTERVIEW WITH AND BY THE AUTHOR ON MISSED HISTORY

By Svetlana Alexievich
Nobel Prize in Literature 2015

Years have passed. Chernobyl has become a metaphor, a symbol. And even a story. Dozens of works have been written, thousands of metres of film material shot. We have the impression that we know everything about Chernobyl: facts, names, figures. What more could one add? And furthermore, it's completely natural that people try to forget by persuading themselves something belongs to the past... What is this book about? Why did I write it?

The book is not about Chernobyl but about the world of Chernobyl. About that of which we knew little; about that which is almost unknown to us. I might have entitled the book "A Missed History". The events in themselves – what happened, who was responsible, how many tons of sand and concrete were necessary to build the sarcophagus over the reactor – did not interest me. I was interested by the sentiments and sensations of people who had come into contact with the unknown, the mysterious.

Chernobyl is a mystery that we have to solve. Perhaps this is a task for the XXIst century. A challenge for this new century. That which man has learned, guessed, discovered about himself and his attitude towards the world. Reconstructing feelings and not events.

Whilst in my previous books I examined the suffering of others, I am now, like each of us, a witness. My life is part of the event. I live here on Chernobyl territory. In little Belarus, which the world had almost never heard of before. In a country that people now say isn't part of earth but a laboratory. Belarusians constitute the people of Chernobyl. Chernobyl has become our home, our national destiny. How might I not have written this book?

So what is Chernobyl? A symbol? An enormous technical catastrophe that is incomparable with any previous event?

It is more than a catastrophe... And placing Chernobyl on a level with the catastrophes we know prevents us from properly reflecting on the phenomenon it represents. We seem to be going forever in the wrong direction. In this case our previous experience is obviously insufficient. Since

Chernobyl we have been living in another world, the old world doesn't exist anymore. But mankind doesn't want to think about this because it never yet has. It was caught short. My interlocutors often said similar things: "I can find no words to describe what I saw and experienced"; "I've never read about similar things, never seen the like at the cinema"; "Nobody had ever told me about things like those I experienced." Such avowals were common and I didn't remove these repetitions from my book. Indeed there are many repetitions. I left them as they were. I didn't remove them, not only because they were true and of "unfalsified character", but also because I thought they emphasised how extraordinary events were. Everything receives a name when it's named for the first time. Here an event had taken place for which there was no designation, one for which we had no analogies or experience. An event to which our eyes and ears are not suited, one for which we do not even have a vocabulary. All our senses are adapted to seeing, hearing or touching. None of all that is possible. To understand, man must overcome his own limits. A new history of sentient mankind has just begun.

But man and his condition are not always in

accordance. Mostly they are not...

I was looking for a shaken mankind. A mankind that had looked all this in the face and started to reflect on it.

For three years I travelled around and interviewed people. Workers from the atomic power station, former party functionaries, doctors, soldiers, emigrants, people who had settled in the forbidden zone... Men and women with different professions and fates from different generations and with different temperaments. Believers and atheists. Peasants and intellectuals. Chernobyl is the essential feature of their world. It poisons everything around them and inside them. Not only the Earth and the water but all their time. An event recounted by one individual is his destiny; one recounted by several people becomes history. That's the hardest thing: reconciling the two truths, the personal and the general. And mankind today is at the breach between two eras.

Two catastrophes took place: a social one during which a huge socialist continent was shipwrecked in front of our very eyes and a cosmic one – Chernobyl.

Two colossal explosions. The former is closer and more comprehensible. People are preoccupied with daily questions: Where to find money for our daily bread? Where should we go? What should we believe? Beneath which flag should we stand? Everyone lives through this. But everyone wants to forget Chernobyl. Initially we hoped to vanquish it, but as we realised how hopeless this was, we fell silent. It's hard to defend ourselves against something that we aren't familiar with. That humanity doesn't know. Chernobyl transported us from one era to another. We face a new reality.

But mankind reveals himself irrespective of what he's talking about. What kind of people are we? Our history consists of suffering. Suffering is our refuge. Our cult. It hypnotises us. But I also wanted to pose different questions about the sense of human life, our existence on Earth.

I travelled, spoke, took notes. These people were the first to see what we only suspected. That which remains a mystery to us all. I give them the floor...

On more than one occasion I had the impression that I was writing down the future.





INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR POL CRUCHTEN

What was the starting point for the film ?

A few years ago, I stumbled on a television program hosted by Michel Field. He was reviewing a book about Chernobyl, entitled *Voices from Chernobyl*, written by an author named Svetlana Alexievich. Field was hailing the book as one of the most important literary event of the 20th century. The next day, I went out to buy the book, and read it in one go. It totally blew me away. I was bewitched, bothered, and bewildered ! Literally carried over to the site of Chernobyl, amongst the survivors. This essay was, undoubtedly, one of the most compelling books I had ever read.

Right away, I wanted to adapt it to the screen, but didn't really know how. Ten years later, I shot a documentary film entitled *Never Die Young*, about a drug abuser. The whole film was narrated by a voice over, without a single line of dialogue. I thought this approach might work for Svetlana's book. We contacted her agent, bought the rights to the book, and started working on the script.

How did you go about adapting the story to the screen ?

For me, it was absolutely essential to respect the prose of Svetlana. The adaptation was basically a selection process. I spotted the sequences that I felt were indispensable. However, the story is so condensed that it was difficult to chose which excerpts to choose from. I felt that, in a way, the selection process was a treason in itself.

Once we had chosen the excerpts, I transcribed everything by hand, in order to grasp the right rhythm for the story. I found it would have been impossible to go through this process on a computer keyboard.

Indeed, the prose of Svetlana Alexievich is at the heart of the film...

Most people think that cinema is more picture than sound. Here, I believe it's the opposite. In retrospect, I think I made this movie for one single individual : Svetlana. And maybe also, egoistically, for myself !

The form of the film is rather uncategorizable. Is the end result consonant with what you imagined when you first started writing ?

When you write a movie, it's always difficult to imagine what the final result will look like. Nonetheless, in this case, the film is pretty much what I had in mind. Before production started, I watched the films of the great director Andrei Tarkovsky, in order to grasp the Russian spirit, but then again, I didn't want to emulate him too much.

Voices from Chernobyl is not a traditionnal essay, but rather a collection of witness accounts, as are most books written by Svetlana Alexievich. This uniqueness was emphasized by the jury of the Nobel prize. Since the film reflects this particularity, it is hard to define it as a documentary or a fiction.

For me, it's clearly a cinematographic essay. I've retained certain elements of the documentary realm, while steering away from the documentary genre, as we know it. For instance, I casted real actors, because I could not contemplate filming the real witnesses whose accounts Svetlana had garnered in her book. Then again, as John Ford once famously said, when there's nothing to film, aim your camera at a man's face. I needed men and women. That human «fabric» is crucial to the film. In her book, Svetlana speaks more about humanity than about the catastrophe itself. She tells us about life, which is what makes it interesting. Without these actors, only the ruins of Chernobyl would remain. It would have been far from enough. On the other hand, the location is authentic. We had a moral obligation to shoot on the premises.



How difficult is it to film in Chernobyl ?

Not as complicated as one would imagine. Of course, there are administrative fees to be paid, but once you're on the premises, it's pretty much straightforward. First, I traveled there with the executive producer, then I returned a few months later with the D.O.P, to scout for locations. Finally, the third time around, we went to shoot the film.

At that time, the red tape irritations mostly came from Kiev. The Ukrainian revolution had just ended, and a mere few kilometers from where we were filming, tensions were palpable. At one point, the situation became so volatile, that we actually had to postpone shooting for a few months.

You make it sound as if Chernobyl is just another film location...

Not at all, it's a peculiar place. The landscapes are striking. We almost had to snatch every scene out of its context to make it work. It was very hard to find the right balance, to strike the right tone. Yet, I never perceived Chernobyl as a surreal or divine territory. In a place such as this, I think it's impossible to hold on to any beliefs. The site is so real that we had to film it in a simple, straightforward way. To cite an example : during the shooting we did a long sequence, filming a figure of Jesus on the Cross. Once in the editing room, I realized that it was totally off-topic. It is a film that I wanted to be radical, with a very concrete approach. I stayed away from any pseudo-poetic effects.

How do you explain that film makers have shown so little interest in Chernobyl, so far ?

Maybe because Europeans have always been reluctant to confront catastrophies that are too close to them. They need time. Of course, back then, Chernobyl was all over the news, but little by little, the media almost eluded the issue. I think that Svetlana Alexievich felt there was a risk of forgetfulness ; that's why she went on the road for three years to garner these witness accounts, before it was too late. The film embraces this very same point of view : fighting against forgetfulness. Look at what's happening in Fukushima. It's exactly the same. When the tsunami devastated the nuclear plant, the whole world was terror-stricken, and then, it started to fade from the memories. But the consequences are very real and disastrous. Yet, hardly anyone mentions it anymore.

There is a sense that through all these testimonies , these " ghost voices " , the film tries to draw a portrait of the human condition...

There is something in *Voices from Chernobyl* that aims at universality. Of course, the main topic revolves around the catastrophe of Chernobyl, but the book also addresses our fears, our ideas, our dreams, our beliefs. It is about nature, and love... All these elements define the human condition. Again, I wanted to remain true to the spirit of the book.

The enamored woman, played by Dinara Droukarova, incarnates the



thread that runs through the book and the film, linking the big story with the intimate narrative . On one side, Chernobyl ; on the other, a woman and her love story.

The film doesn't seek a definitive truth, objective and scientific. Rather, it assumes a form of subjectivity, trying to relate to intimate experiences. This polyphony of witness accounts allows the film to reveal a certain reality about Chernobyl.

We are in 2016. The catastrophe happened thirty years ago. What does this anniversary mean to you ?

The 30th anniversary will serve to pay tribute to the victims, and to reevaluate the nuclear issue. We have to be aware that this catastrophe can happen anywhere in the world, even in France, a country that has concisouly embraced the nuclear industry.

Interview by Vincent Quénault



PRODUCER'S COMMENTS BY JEANNE GEIBEN

Dealing with the theme of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe initially seemed monumental and scary. The topic is searing, the dossier top-secret. A more obvious approach would probably have been to go at it head-on with a finger-pointing and didactic documentary film. That wasn't what we wanted.

Svetlana Alexievich, the great Belarusian writer and historian, created an admirable synthesis of the "Chernobyl affair" in a standard work that was translated into all the languages of the Western world but banned in many countries, including her own: *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*.

Pol Cruchten found this extraordinary work an inexhaustible source of inspiration. The subject held a special fascination for him because of his passionate interest in Slavic culture, and he decided to process the eye-witness accounts collected by Svetlana into an unconventional and uncoded cinematographic form exhibiting aspects both of documentary and fictional filmmaking.

We filmed *Voices from Chernobyl* during the course of 2014 at the original sites of the catastrophe in Ukraine whilst the country was shaken by a further catastrophe. There was something strange about raising the ghosts of a land in turmoil. Chernobyl, the ghost town, remained endlessly silent whilst less than 100 kilometres away Ukrainian citizens were fighting for their Crimea against the entirety of Russia.

The link between these events is now, more than ever, the country's people. It is struck by the force of its revolution as it was once struck by an entirely unexpected nuclear catastrophe.

Voices from Chernobyl returns to the victims of Chernobyl a face and a voice - lest we forget.

SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH – WRITER

Svetlana Alexievich was born 31 May 1948, in the Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankovsk. Since the 1950's, she has been a resident of Bielorussia.

After her father's demobilisation from the army, she returned to her native Bielorussia, where her work has been constantly censored by the dictorial regime of her government.

In 2015, she was awarded the Nobel prize in literature for her «polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time», in the words of the jury. She is the first Russian-speaking woman to receive such a distinction.

Svetlana Alexievich has appropriated a literary genre that is deeply rooted in non-fiction. It's alternatively been called «collective novel» or «novel oratorio». Book after book, she has refined a documentary prose all her own that highlights her skill to weave together hundreds of interviews, creating a work of condensed humanity.

Her books, which chronicle war and its repercussions, have been translated in more than thirty languages. She has devoted most of her work recounting the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, by intimately focusing on the anonymous individuals who lived through it.

Published in 1985, her first essay, *War Does Not Have a Woman's Face*, is a collection of women's stories from WWII. It was denounced by authorities as «unpatriotic, naturalistic, and degrading». Yet Mikhail Gorbachev's unwavering support for the book, turned it into a best-seller.

Each new book by Alexievich provokes an event and a scandal : *Boys in Zinc*, published in 1989, about what the effect of the Afghan war on Soviet soldiers and their relatives, was nearly banned ; *Enchanted with Death*, published in 1993, chronicles the string of suicides that followed the fall of the USSR, and, finally, in 1987, *Voices from Chernobyl*, denounces the horrific repercussions of the Chernobyl disaster.

Voices from Chernobyl : The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster has received many prestigious awards, among which the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize, in 2001. The book is still banned in Bielorussia, although the 2015 Nobel prize award for literature has brought Svetlana Alexievich a notoriety that seems to have mollify the government's stance.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1985 - WAR DOES NOT HAVE A WOMAN'S FACE

1985 - THE LAST WITNESSES: A HUNDRED OF UNCHILDLIKE LULLABYS

1991 - BOYS IN ZINC

1993 - ENCHANTED WITH DEATH

1995 - VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL : THE ORAL HISTORY OF A NUCLEAR DISASTER

2013 - SECOND-HAND TIME



BIOGRAPHY OF POL CRUCHTEN - DIRECTOR

Pol Cruchten is a Luxembourgish director and producer who graduated from Paris' ESEC film school (École Supérieure d'Études Cinématographiques) in 1987.

In 1988 he shot his first short, *Somewhere in Europe*, with French actor Howard Vernon.

In 1992 his first feature, *Hochzäitsnuecht* (*Wedding night - End of the Song*), was an official contribution to the Cannes Film Festival in the "Un Certain Regard" category. In the following year it was awarded the Max Ophüls Prize at the eponymous festival in Saarbrücken.

Pol Cruchten then went on to film *Black Dju* (1997) with Philippe Léotard, Richard Courcet and Cesaria Evroa, a thriller about emigration. It was followed by *Boys on the Run* (2003), which he made with Ron Perlman in Hollywood, and *Perl oder Pica* (*Little Secrets*, 2006) with André Jung, which was a success in Luxemburg.

After *Never Die Young*, Pol Cruchten codirected with Frank Hoffmann film *Les Brigands* (*Die Räuber*), based on the Friedrich Schiller play, featuring Eric Caravaca, Tchéky Karyo, Maximillian Schell and Isild Le Besco, which is to open in Luxemburg in 2015. In 2014 he filmed *Voices from Chernobyl* in Ukraine, drawing on Svetlana Alexievich's bestseller.

Pol Cruchten is an activist for Luxembourgish film, and together with Tarak Ben Amar, Frank Feitler and Jeanne Geiben co-founded the production company Red Lion in 1996. The short and feature films he has supported as a producer include *W* by Luc Feit, *Le Manie-tout* by Georges Le Piouffle, *We Might As Well Fail* by Govinda Van Maele, *Sweetheart Come* by Jacques Molitor and *Double Saut* by Laura Schroeder

FILMOGRAPHY

- SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE (1988) short
- HOCHZÄITSNUECHT (*Wedding Night - End of the Song*, 1992)
- SNIPER (1995) short
- BLACK DJU (*Black Dju Dibonga*, 1997)
- BOYS ON THE RUN (2003)
- NUIT AMERE (2005) short
- PERL ODER PICA (*Little Secrets*, 2006)
- NEVER DIE YOUNG (2014)
- DIE RÄUBER (2015)
- VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL (2015)



DINARA DROUKAROVA - ACTRESS

Dinara Droukarova was born in Leningrad (now St-Petersburg), in 1976.

She made her movie debut at age 12 in the film *It Was Near The Sea*, directed by Ayan Shakhmalieva, in 1988, but it is her role in Vitali Kanevski's feature film *Bouge pas, meurs, ressuscite*, that brought her international fame, two years later, at the Cannes Film Festival, in 1990, where the film won the Caméra d'or. In 1992, she collaborated again with the Russian director in *Une vie indépendante*, followed by the documentary feature *Nous, les enfants du XX^e siècle*, in 1994.

In 1995, Dinara Droukarova decided to pursue her career in France. She learned the language to perform in *Le Fils de Gascogne*, a play in which she co-stars with two fellow expatriates : Macha Méril and Marina Vlady. In 2003, she made a brief appearance in *Les Petites Coupures*, directed by Pascal Bonitzer.

That same year, *Depuis qu'Otar est parti*, directed by Julie Bertucelli, truly revealed her to the public, in this characterization of three generations of women. Her subtly hued performance earned her the Prix Michel Simon, followed by a César nomination for Best young actress, in 1994.

Sharing her time between St-Petersburg and France, Dinara Droukarova has worked with directors Joann Sfar (*Gainsbourg, vie héroïque*), Michael Haneke (*Amour*), Fernando Meirelles (*360*), and Arnaud Desplechin (*Trois souvenirs de ma jeunesse*).

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

1988 – IT WAS NEAR SEA, by Ayan Shakhmalieva

1990 – BOUGE PAS, MEURS, RESSUSCITE, by Vitali Kanevski – Caméra d'or, Cannes Film Festival, 1990

1992- UNE VIE INDÉPENDANTE, by Vitali Kanevski – Prix du jury, Cannes Film Festival, 1992

1994 – NOUS, LES ENFANTS DU XX^e SIÈCLE, by Vitali Kanevski

1995- LE FILS DE GASCOGNE, by Pascal Aubier

1998- DES MONSTRES ET DES HOMMES, by Aleksei Balabanov – Quinzaine des réalisateurs - Cannes 1998

1999- DES ANGES AU PARADIS, by Evgueni Lounguine – Quinzaine des réalisateurs – Cannes, 1999

2003- PETITES COUPURES, by Pascal Bonitzer

2003- DEPUIS QU'OTAR EST PARTI..., by Julie Bertucelli – Grand prix de la Semaine de la critique, Cannes.

2006 – TRANSE, by Teresa Villaverde

2006- JE PENSE À VOUS, by Pascal Bonitzer

2007- SAUF LE SILENCE, by Léa Fehner

2008- COUPABLE, by Laetitia Masson

2009- QU'UN SEUL TIENNE ET LES AUTRES SUIVRONT, by Léa Fehner

2010 – GAINSBOURG, VIE HÉROÏQUE, by Joann Sfar

2012 – AMOUR, by Michael Haneke

2012 – 360, by Fernando Meirelles

2013 – ARRÊTEZ-MOI, de Jean-Paul Lilienfeld

2013- MARUSSIA, by Eva Pervolovici

2014 – 1001 GRAMMES, by Bent Hamer

2015 – TROIS SOUVENIRS DE MA JEUNESSE, by Arnaud Desplechin

2016 – LA SUPPLICATION, by Pol Cruchten



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred on April 26, 1986, in the Lenin plant, located in the town of Pripyat, in Ukraine, then officially called the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Caused by a sudden and unexpected power surge, leading to the meltdown of the reactor, the accident triggered an explosion and released large amounts of radioactive elements in the atmosphere.

Since the disaster first broke out as a major fire, the director of the plant, Viktor Petrovich Brioukhanov, called on the firefighters. All were seriously irradiated, and most died in great suffering.

It took 18 days to smother the core of the reactor.

In the months that followed, about 600,000 workers, the so called "liquidators" brought in from Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia, were mandated to clean and decontaminate the surrounding land.

Because their individual protection against radioactive radiation was very low or next to zero,

60,000 liquidators died in the aftermath, while almost 200,000 returned from Chernobyl with permanent disabilities.

The disaster led to broad environmental contamination, immediate deaths and chronic illnesses within the surrounding populations.

Officially, Mikhail Gorbachev was not informed of the disaster before the 27th or 28th of April. On the morning of the 28th, an abnormal level of radioactivity was detected at the Forsmark nuclear power plant in Sweden. Fairly quickly, it was determined that the contamination originated from outside the plant, and from the East.

The true magnitude of the disaster was finally revealed by Gorbachev, during a televised address, on May 14th.

Two years after the tragedy, Valery Legasov, a scientist and senior Soviet official in charge of nuclear affairs, who co-wrote and presented the report of the first government commission in charge of Chernobyl, hanged himself. He denounced how the way the accident was handled by authorities. Posthumously, he

published "My duty is to speak" in the Pravda.

Regarded to this day as the most serious nuclear accident ever recorded, Chernobyl was rated at level 7 on the International Nuclear Events Scale. To this day, Fukushima, in 2011, is the only other disaster to have reached that level.

Following the Chernobyl disaster, 200,000 people were evacuated from their homes. Between 1986 and 2002, 4,000 thyroid cancers have been formally diagnosed within the local populations, and identified as direct consequences of the nuclear accident.

The Chernobyl disaster leaves behind an unprecedented account of dire consequences in terms of public health, human, environmental, and financial aspects.



La Huit presents

A Red Lion production (Luxembourg)
in co-production with KGP (Austria)

VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL
Original title : LA SUPPLICATION

Adapted and directed by Pol Cruchten
from the book by Svetlana Alexievich

With Dinara Drukarova
Iryna Voloshyna
Vitaliy Matvienko

Voices by Camille Saltet de Sablet
Marc Citti
Éric Caravaca
Laurence Côte
Salomé Stévenin
Robinson Stévenin

Produced by Jeanne Geiben - Red Lion

Co-produced by Gabriele Kranzelbinder - KGP

Director
of Photography Jerzy Palacz, AAC, PSC

Sound Oleg Goloveshkin
Sergiy Stepanyk
Ingo Dumlich
Mike Butcher

Set design Ivan Levchenko

Editing Dominique Gallieni

Music André Mergenthaler
Luma Luma Earthsounds

With the supports of Film Fund Luxembourg
ÖFI (Autriche)

Location Ukraine

Original language Français

Length 86'

photos : Jerzy Palacz/Harald Rude
design : Nicolas Kunc
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DIRECTORY
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LUXEMBOURG