

Chernobyl Episode 1 Notes

For each of the five episodes, you will be responsible for taking notes in a way that demonstrates your active viewing and critical thinking. There are two purposes to this task: 1) to engage your mind in a way that will make your experience with this text more meaningful and 2) to have a record of that experience that could be used for summative projects (a paper, your IO, etc.).

To complete this assignment, you may respond to the stimuli I have listed, keep your own set of reactions, or some combination of the two. If you choose not to use the list of stimuli, here are some suggestions for what you might record:

- What are the broad themes suggested or questions raised by the narrative?
- What do the characters' choices and the actors' depictions of those choices reveal about their values, conflicts, motivations, and identities?
- What literary techniques (symbolism, juxtaposition, irony, foreshadowing, allusion, etc.) are used and what is their effect on the viewer?
- How does the set design, lighting, framing, and cinematography contribute to the mood of the text?
- What is interesting or significant about the language of the dialogue?
- How does narrative time impact the viewer's experience with the story?
- What questions does the episode raise for you? These could be questions of comprehension (what's happening here? what does this mean?), questions of ethics, questions of significance, etc.
- What connections does this episode raise for you? You could make connections to other literary works, current or historical events, or your own life.

Episode 1 Content Warning: a depiction of suicide early in the episode

Episode 1 Optional Stimuli:

1. Consider the opening lines of the series as Valery Legasov, a nuclear physicist responsible for mitigating the Chernobyl disaster, reflects on his experience two years later: "What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, that we no longer recognize 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?" *What major themes is Legasov introducing with these statements and questions?*

Note: The opening shots of episode 1 depict a drab, lightless, utilitarian apartment, which helps us to establish the atmosphere of the story. We come to learn that this is Legasov's apartment, and while these shots set up the emotional register of the piece, critics have pointed out that an upper-level bureaucrat like Legasov would certainly have lived in a more comfortable dwelling.

2. What is Legasov doing with the tapes? (How could it be ironic that he wraps the tapes in *newspaper*?)
3. What is the effect of the rhythmic humming in the background?
4. At 5:48, for just about two seconds, we see a shot of the handkerchief that Legasov was coughing into earlier. If you look closely, you can see spots of red on it. What is the implication?
5. With Legasov's suicide, we understand that this story is beginning *in media res*. What impact might that have on what is to come in the narrative?
6. How much earlier are the events in Pripjat taking place?

7. Notice Lyudmilla coming out of the bathroom in the middle of the night – this is going to be significant later (there is a reason she is up at that hour with a horrible implication).

Note: Tasting metal is a sign of radiation poisoning.

Note: A dosimeter is a machine to measure radiation.

8. Why are the men working in the plant getting sick?
9. How does the cinematography use color, light, framing, and perspective to give this part of the story an eerie, unsettling mood?
10. What do you think the pieces of metal scattered over the grounds outside are?
11. What do the plant workers see when they open the yellow door and look down at the core of the plant?
12. What is Akimov's leadership style?
13. When Akimov is confronted with evidence that something truly terrible has happened, why doesn't he want to acknowledge that reality?

Note: Iodine can help prevent the body from absorbing radiation.

14. What is the source of tension in the conversation between Dyatlov, Fomin, and Bryukhanov?
15. How is it (situationally) ironic when the woman on the bridge calls the fire "beautiful?"
16. How is it (dramatically) ironic when dust comes down on the families standing on the bridge?
17. Why does the plant worker ask for a cigarette? (Also notice where he's bleeding from.)
18. In the meeting of the Pripyat Executive Committee, what do we come to learn about Soviet politics and governance?
How do we see some of the themes introduced in the opening lines of the episode?
19. How is the line "contain the spread of misinformation" ironic, given the context?
20. How is Dyatlov's vomiting and collapse ironic?
21. How do we see the conflict between the individual and the collective good in the narrative?
22. When Sitnikov is forced to go physically look at the core, what cinematographic techniques help the viewer to understand what a grave moment that is?
23. What is the implication of the cloud of black dust traveling over the horizon to the city?
24. What are we to make of the closing shot of the bird?