


C H E R N O B Y L

HBO'S *CHERNOBYL* CLEANED UP AT 2019'S EMMYS BUT FACED ACCUSATIONS OF DISTORTING THE FACTS TO TELL A STORY. AT THIS YEAR'S BBC UNTOLD STORYTELLING FESTIVAL, JOHN YORKE DISCUSSED HOW SHAPING THE FACTS INTO A NARRATIVE REVEALED MORE OF THE TRUTH ABOUT THE EVENT. READ THE ADAPTATION OF HIS CONTRIBUTION.



JOHN YORKE STORY
SHAPE STORIES THAT WORK



ANYONE WHO IS OLD ENOUGH
REMEMBERS WHAT THEY WERE DOING
WHEN NEWS OF THE CHERNOBYL
EXPLOSION AND THE DETECTION OF A
RADIOACTIVE CLOUD MOVING
TOWARDS THE UK BROKE.

Over subsequent months and years the impact of the explosion leaked out in stories, ranging from radioactive lambs in Wales to millions of humans at risk from radiation poisoning. But it's taken 25 years and an HBO drama to bring the full story to light. Why? Because there was so much information, so many stories, so much data, obfuscation and confusion that no one could make sense of it.

Until, that is, it was shaped into a story. Narrative structure provided the backbone around which to wrap the facts and characters.

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Svetlana Alexievich said the book she found easiest to write was *Chernobyl Prayer*. Her interviewees, she discovered, had no preconceived ideas about what the story of the exploding nuclear reactor was. It existed outside of comprehension – it had never been told. So, while she'd written other oral histories, none were so real as this, because this time none of her subjects had a preconceived story to fall back on.

As a recent article in *The New Yorker* posited, this meant there was a vacuum – and with her help, fresh, new, untainted first-person narrative rushed in to fill it.

Her book formed the basis of the HBO/Sky TV series *Chernobyl*, and with that the accepted – western – narrative is now complete.



THE HBO SERIES

Chernobyl is one of the most widely acclaimed dramas of recent years, hailed as much for its commitment to realism as its dramatic power – evidenced by the show netting 10 Emmys at 2019's awards, including wins for writing and direction.

‘The material culture of the Soviet Union’, *The New Yorker* enthused, ‘is reproduced with an accuracy that has never before been seen in Western television or film – or, for that matter, in Russian television or film. Clothes, objects, and light itself seem to come straight out of nineteen-eighties Ukraine, Belarus, and Moscow.’

However, there were a series of ‘buts’ that crystallised around one key objection: ‘...the creators of *Chernobyl*’, they say, ‘imagine confrontation where confrontation was unthinkable – and, in doing so, they cross the line from conjuring a fiction to creating a lie.’

Nowhere more clearly was this ‘lie’ projected than in the character of the lone heroic scientist battling against Soviet hypocrisy: Khomyuk, played by Emily Watson.

Her character ‘appears to embody every possible Hollywood fantasy’, the piece thunders. ‘In the absence of a Chernobyl narrative, the makers of the series have used the outlines of a disaster movie. There are a few terrible men who bring the disaster about, and a few brave and all-knowing ones, who ultimately save Europe from becoming uninhabitable and who tell the world the truth.’

The programme makers had taken something that was complex, grey, difficult and un-heroic and turned it into a classic Hollywood narrative shape.



DISASTER MOVIES

The Towering Inferno and *The Day After Tomorrow* are *Chernobyl*.

The Poseidon Adventure and *Airport* are *Chernobyl*.

Earthquake, *Independence Day*, *Contagion* – all are *Chernobyl*.

And Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* and Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* – they are Khomyuk, fighting a monster with civilisation at stake. And that's a lie.

The New Yorker saw this as a terrible betrayal of the truth. And on one level it's possible to argue that it is, but it's possible to argue too that the programme was chided for doing what all humans do: reducing the incomprehensible into a form that brings us greater understanding, greater comprehension – reality in its most easily digestible form.

Or what human beings call story.

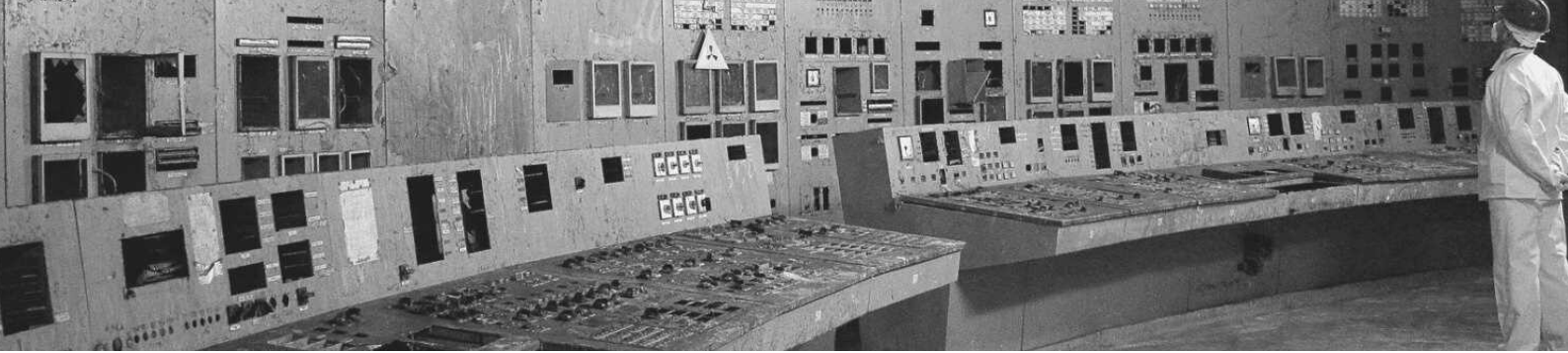
The world is beyond our comprehension. Too big, too complex; and we are too insignificant to ever comprehend its scale. So, we distil the fragments we *do* discern into a shape.

In the final episode of *Chernobyl* there is a rigged show trial, and KGB Chairman Charkov calmly tells our other hero Legasov it's a necessary process:

'We will have our villains, we will have our hero, we will have our truth.'

And that's the shape. The Soviet show trial will do what we do every second of our waking lives. **We peer at reality and we search for a hero, we search for a villain, we find a truth – and we call that story.**

It's easy to scoff, but we bestow those roles every day. We are constantly imposing this shape on the world around us – sometimes according to enlightenment principles of empirical observation tempered by rationality, but, perhaps more disturbingly, often not.



WHAT IS THIS SHAPE?

At its most reductive it's this: a character faced with a problem goes in search of a solution.

In detective fiction it's detective seeks murderer: Sarah Lund in *The Killing* seeking justice for Nanna Birk Larsen. In medical fiction it's doctor seeks cure: Gregory House battles logic-defying illness and finds miraculous cure.

Add a bit more colour, **it's a flawed human being faced with an unexpected problem – and in searching for a solution to that problem, they overcome that flaw and are healed.**

So, the drunk detective solves the case and finds alcohol-free redemption; the scared doctor saves un-saveable life and finds courage they never knew they had.

The same shape transcends genre too. In *Rocketman* a grown-up Elton John finds true love when he finally accepts the shy, vulnerable Reg Dwight within.

And if you want some icing on the cake, just add sex: Jane Eyre overcomes her lack of self-esteem and is rewarded with free passage to the marital bed of Rochester. James Bond is presented with a world threatening nemesis, saves the world and is rewarded with sexual union.

That's traditional story – a fictional archetype that has nourished us for thousands of years:

Chernobyl

A nuclear reactor has exploded. What caused it? Our lone hero will find out.

Line of Duty

Who is H? Our intrepid heroes will discover.

These are wonderful fictional tropes that we can see in television, film, video games and theatre wherever we look. However, these tropes may find an even more fertile field as human beings grapple with reality.



Ask a Brexit Party member: ‘our country is failing – why?’
How will they answer? ‘Immigration – ban it.’

Ask a Trump voter: ‘our country is failing – why?’
How will they answer? ‘Mexicans – build a wall.’

Both are simple stories – problems with simple, clear, tangible, binary solutions.
They are lies. But they *work*.

Every story has a protagonist, an antagonist, a problem, a journey and a solution. And if I asked you to write a story in four words you would be hard-pressed to come up with anything better than:

‘Make America Great Again’

It’s a masterclass in condensed narrative – you can infer protagonist, antagonist, a problem, a journey and a solution. They’re all there. And what – in 2016 – did Hillary Clinton offer in return?

‘Stronger Together’

A story with no verb. In other words – not a story.

Trump is a Hollywood blockbuster. Simple. Binary. Hero and villain. *‘Drain the Swamp’* – problem and solution.

Clinton is a wishy-washy meaningless soup. It’s a bad arthouse movie.

The winner in politics is *always* the one with the best story, because stories give us the two things we most desire: **change and order**.

In *Chernobyl*, KGB Chairman Charkov calmly tells Legasov, ‘we will have our villains, we will have our hero, we will have our truth’. Change and order.

Binary stories reduce reality to what we want it to be.



In the recent *The Untold* broadcast from the Hay Festival, John Lanchester noted that the word ‘fiction’ is derived from the past participle of the latin ‘fingere’: *fictionem* – to shape, to knead, to form out of clay.

Shaping. Structure. Order.

WE SHAPE REALITY

In America in 2007, a writers’ strike designed to boost rates of pay was successful on one hand, but, on the other, the law of unintended consequences came into play.

Audiences craved drama, but with no writers to write it there was a vacuum – and some very smart people rushed into that vacuum with something cheaper, something geared to sensation, and something that was catnip to advertisers. The narrative vacuum was filled with reality television.

In our hunger for stories lay both revelation and revolution. This was year zero. But it wasn’t just *Real Housewives of New Jersey*... Nor just *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*... Nor just *The Osbournes*, but...

S-Town

Serial

West Cork

...and so many more.

The roots of all of these programmes and podcasts started here. From 2007, people started to talk about narrative in a different way. Or, rather, they started to *understand* something that had – with the exception of a smart few – never been articulated.

One of those smart few was the legendary R4 broadcaster Alistair Cooke, who said: **‘No matter what you’re talking about – gardening, economics, murder – you’re telling a story.’**

Cooke understood better than anyone that all broadcasting is storytelling.



But is it? I played *Letter from America* to a group of students recently, and they found him mannered and boring. They said the world had moved on. Storytelling, my students argued, has changed.

But has it? Think of drama in Elizabethan times. Think of Shakespeare. In the Globe Theatre, how were these stories consumed?

- *The audience drank alcohol*
- *In the open air, standing*
- *For a very long period of time*

It was structured to make that experience as comfortable as possible for the audience; with four breaks for them to stretch their legs, empty their bladders and return excited to enjoy a new narrative direction.

It was structured in five acts.

Structure is a product of the method of consumption

When the King's Players moved inside, the structure became more rigid as the plays were now moulded by new technology – each act became the length of a candle.

Structure is a product of technology

So, technology changes the way stories are consumed too – it adapts to match the method of consumption.

From podcast to true life crime and the people at the heart of *The Untold*, all are the products of technological change that allows us tell stories in new ways – just as catch-up and video-on-demand gave rise to the triumph of *The Killing* and *Broadchurch* on television.

Now, thanks to Netflix and other streaming services, we are in the new golden age of the mini-series. Evidence of stories changing because of technology before our eyes, on our screens every evening. From *The Bridge* to *True Detective* to *Black Mirror*, stories are sculpted to fit each new technological innovation.

But only the shape. The underlying story structure never alters. It is timeless. So, what is this structure? Where does it come from?



THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

It's essay structure – posit the problem, explore both sides, come to a conclusion. A child encounters fire, observes it and learns that it's hot.

Storytelling is merely the codification of our method of learning – expressed normally in three act shape.

That's not to belittle it. It's a shape, of course, that's immensely powerful. And has enormous benefits. For the period the narrative lasts we can become Emily Watson or Jared Harris solving the mystery of *Chernobyl*. It's this that allows us to understand the Chernobyl disaster by experiencing it vicariously, *emotionally*.

So, for that reason, this shape can be enormously beneficial. But very dangerous too. Again, we return to KGB Chairman Charkov calmly telling Legasov, **'we will have our villains, we will have our hero, we will have our truth'**.

In order to be comprehensible, entertaining, and above all *clear*, *Chernobyl* reduced life to a binary. That's at the heart of the criticism because, of course, life isn't reducible to binaries. It's grey, messy, complex, unfathomable. And that fills us with existential dread.

THE GREEN BUS

I have a two-and-a-half-year-old child. Unable to control the world, he instead fixates on his 'green bus' – the one that sits across the room and he can't quite reach. Counter to all rationality, he believes that if only he can have his green bus then the world will be fine.

He can't control the world. He's too small, the world too big. So, he sublimates his fear onto something he can control. He reduces life to a manageable binary. Look at the world around us.

From America's Trump to Britain's Corbyn, Turkey's Erjodjan to Holland's Wilders, Italy's Salvini, Hungary's Orban and France's Le Pen – the rise of populism is spreading across the world. What do they offer?



Simple binaries that offer falsely to lead us to salvation.

Green buses.

Look at Brexit. It's our green bus. If only we can have our green bus all will be well. 'Green bus!' my baby shouts across the room. 'Green bus!' we shout across the country. For if we have our green bus, the world will be well.

We will have our hero, our villain, our truth. **We will have our story.**

So perhaps *The New Yorker* is unfair in criticising *Chernobyl*. Perhaps it should be criticising us.

JOHN YORKE IS THE UK'S FOREMOST EXPERT ON STORY STRUCTURE.

AS FORMER HEAD OF CHANNEL FOUR DRAMA AND CONTROLLER OF BBC DRAMA PRODUCTION, JOHN SHAPED STORIES THAT ATTRACTED SOME OF THE BIGGEST AUDIENCES FOR DRAMA IN UK TV HISTORY.

YOU CAN LEARN STORYTELLING WITH JOHN ONLINE, FROM WHEREVER YOU ARE. EXPLORE HIS COURSES [HERE](#).

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