

Chernobyl Zombified

Have you seen HBO's mini-series Chernobyl? It's terrifying, isn't it? Some of the people with radiation poisoning looked like they came out of a zombie film. And all the talk of Chernobyl turning into a series of atomic bombs worse than Hiroshima and Nagasaki was nerve-racking.

But... you can relax. This mini-series was full of drama that was disturbingly inaccurate.

What is it about nuclear electricity generation that makes Hollywood producers want to hype dangers that are not really a thing? Or, in fact, are pretty small?

The real problem in the Chernobyl disaster was Soviet cost-cutting combined with the arrogance and incompetence endemic in autocratic regimes. As an industry, modern nuclear power is reliable and safe. Apparently, the producers of the series didn't think a nuclear meltdown was dramatic enough, so they created a horror flick.

The people exposed to extreme amounts of radiation were shown with blistered, peeling skin, worse than zombies even. But radiation poisoning doesn't work that way. Extreme amounts will definitely kill you quickly, but not in the gory way it was portrayed in Chernobyl. The series also made it appear that radiation is contagious like a virus. That's ridiculous. It suggested that a pregnant woman lost an unborn child because she had absorbed radiation from her dying husband. Also, ridiculous.

A lot of people irrationally fear nuclear power because they associate it with nuclear weapons. But these are two very different things. Chernobyl nonetheless connected the two, contributing to this ongoing paranoia. In one scene a physicist says, "Chernobyl reactor number 4 is now a nuclear bomb." He then says it will go off hour after hour and won't stop "...until the entire continent is dead." That was some serious fearmongering.

Yes, Chernobyl was a terrible disaster that ultimately killed hundreds and probably many thousands. But it was nothing akin to a nuclear bomb.

Nuclear power has been a key component of the electricity mix in the developed world for the last half-century with about 450 reactors currently online. There have been only three notable meltdowns. The other two include Three Mile Island, which was contained with no deaths or environmental harm. And the third was Fukushima, an old design that was hit by a giant tsunami.

Despite its excellent safety record, unsubstantiated fear-mongering about nuclear electricity has led to massive regulations, making it uneconomic relative to natural gas or coal in most countries.

The nuclear industry isn't the only victim of sensationalized horrors from Hollywood. The oil and natural gas industry and its use of hydraulic fracturing has been targeted for years. Movie producers have tried to scare people with films such as GasLand and Promised Land. The claims made in those movies have been soundly debunked, but like the Chernobyl mini-series, the frightening images live on in the minds of many people who don't know they are manipulations.

Here's an idea for a mini-series that would scare people—but in a good way. Unhinged activists actually get their way and we quickly lose fossil fuel and nuclear, which make up about 90 percent of the world's energy supply. Now that would be a horror show... One that might lead to more folks taking energy reality more seriously.

For the Clear Energy Alliance, I'm Mark Mathis. Power On.



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