



Markian Kamysh, Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi

"Chernobyl should have been preserved as a cultural object"

A conversation with Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi

Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi is probably the biggest star among Ukrainian directors. At the Cannes film festival in 2014, his film *The Tribe* won three Critics' Week prizes and was nominated for the Caméra d'Or, and the magazine *Rolling Stone* called it the most intense film of 2015.

Slaboshpytskyi's next project is *Luxembourg*, an art film about life in today's Chernobyl zone. Screening rights to the film have already been acquired in a number of European countries.

Myroslav talks about his plans for the future, his early works, the problems of Ukrainian culture and the Chernobyl zone.

Markian Kamysh: I've seen your films *The Diagnosis*, *Deafness*, *Nuclear Waste*, and *The Tribe*, and I understand why you're called the "Titanic" of Ukrainian cinema. Which of these films is dearest to you, and which one's filming do you think of with the greatest nostalgia?

Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi: They are all small films, and clearly the most important of them is *The Tribe*. It changed my circumstances the most, although in a certain sense it grew out of *Deafness*. And, of course, the making of short films is a unique kind of activity.

To make a short film, you don't need state support or some sort of huge opportunity. In principle, you could grab a camera and your friends and manage with these alone, although the budget of *The Diagnosis* was 35,000 dollars. We filmed it with a Kodak, on film. It was 2008, and I got the money from my dad and the pharmaceutical company Darnytsia.

This is what all Americans go through too, though not Europeans: the investors in your first film are friends and family.

And as far as *Deafness* goes, in a certain sense it gave rise to *The Tribe*, which was shot in the same region. So *Deafness* was an attempt at working out the concept of *The Tribe*...

Nuclear Waste will also have a certain influence on *Luxembourg*. We showed it as a "pilot" for *Luxembourg*, because it's obviously time to speak from the heart on this matter. But I think I've put the topic of *Deafness* behind me.

MK: Film critics have called *The Tribe* a "film about love". If you were asked to give a phrase to characterize *Luxembourg*, what would you say? Besides the fact that it is going to be a film about the Zone as it exists today and the people

who work in this unique "country within a country", almost nothing is known about it. Are there any details that have now been worked out that you'd be willing to share?



Ukrainian film director Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi at the 6th Odessa International Film Festival. Photo: Andriy Makukha (Amakuha). Source: [Wikimedia](#)

MS: I learned how to explain what *The Tribe* is about when I was giving my first couple dozen interviews. When you're filming, you really don't think what the film is about. It is an irrational process. You think up the story and dream up the style, and these are the two most important things. The story has to cross over into the style, and the style has to cross over into the story. They operate as one.

But to go the route where you think "I'm making a film about this or that" seems somewhat misguided to me, because people have been watching movies for a long time now ... the cinema has existed for 120 years. And a director can underscore an idea, but when he does so, he loses an emotional connection with the viewer, because the viewer immediately understands what is being "fed" to him rather than being emotionally engaged. And the most important thing that can happen in cinema is emotional engagement.

Thinking up something new is extremely complicated, and when I watch films I am less interested in their stories. I'm tired of films that tell stories ... there should be a story, but there should also be a chemistry of sorts, some emotional action.

So that brings us to *Luxembourg*, and the main problem here is finding an emotional context. To put it bluntly, does it work, or doesn't it? The truth, or how engaging the story is, or the dramaturgy — these don't matter in the bigger picture ... All these things are important, but they are not sufficient. It's always enough to look at a single shot, and from that one shot you'll be able to tell: "It's working." And if it's working, it has to be put into the film.

How can you tell if something's working? It's like pornography: everyone knows it when they see it, but no one can explain it. But it's working! Great! And if it works, it works. So right now we're doing a lot of test shots. I planned some things out on paper and then there are a lot more things that I haven't thought up yet, but thinking things up is what I'm paid for; it's my job.

And now we're traveling around, hiring extras and filming preliminary versions of scenes that will be in the film, but will be re-shot with actors who

were in *The Tribe*. And we're watching, trying to figure out whether it works or not. Whether we're on the right track or not. We still have time — we're just rehearsing.

MK: You, in essence, "belong" to the Zone. Talk about your experience working there in the 1990s. About your visits there, about your acquaintance with that place. What has changed? What struck you then, and what does now? And — a question that's particularly important when we talk about *Luxembourg* — what potential backdrops did you notice then, and what now?

MS: The 1990s were a golden age. It was much more dangerous, I think, in the sense of radioactivity, than it is now. The system was crueler. We were disguised several times. The '90s were a time of flourishing. That was the first time I went there and was absolutely stunned. I saw the Zone as a staggering, fantastical art object, as a huge theatre set.

Back then I went everywhere, not just to the town of Pripyat. I was working for an agency called Chernobyl Inter Inform, an organization that dealt not only with tourism, but also with escorting delegations, scholars and the press. My desire to make a film about the Chernobyl zone, and the cognitive dissonance I feel today in connection with working on *Luxembourg*, are connected to the notion that my inspiration and enchantment are based on the Zone of the '90s, on something that no longer exists.

I don't want to fib: it was sometime around 1996 or 1997. Back then the trees hadn't grown as much and it was a sort of slightly overgrown city. And a more or less preserved city. Now Pripyat looks not just like it has been looted, but like something out of the series *Life after People*.

In the summer you can't see anything there. That is, you go into the city of Pripyat, and you see Prospekt Lenina, which looks like a forest. And in that forest you can scarcely make out buildings of some sort or another. This means it is utterly unsuitable for filming, which is somewhat depressing, because it was an absolutely fantastic object.

Rassokha, for example, where there was a huge field full of various amazing Soviet machinery, might have been a bit muddy, but it was there. And there were helicopters standing there, in that field. It was a sort of fantastical museum, a cultural object, an improbable place, and now it's totally gone, it's been "cut down".

Last August we went to that machine cemetery in Rassokha, and it's littered with various pieces of metal. Everything has been reduced to scrap.

Now it's too late. But maybe it would have made sense to preserve it as a cultural object? Delegations travel there, and after all it's the site of a significant man-made catastrophe. It's been talked up by a PR machine, and people visit it constantly.

And as painful as it might be to hear it, all everyone knows about us is "Klitschko, Dynamo Kyiv, Chernobyl". And that's it. Well, and I guess you can add Maidan now. It was a brand.

Although, I recently explained to people in New York that Chernobyl isn't Russia, and they were sincerely amazed. Somehow or other, Ukraine managed to privatize Chernobyl, even though it hit Belarus too, and it affected Russia.

But Chernobyl and Pripyat are Ukrainian cities, and this is our "inheritance". It might be a dubious inheritance, but, naturally, just as with any other of our achievements and memorials, we've spectacularly wasted it. That's a national character trait of ours. Because no one bothered to save Chernobyl.

I don't think it was so important and profitable to dismantle Rassokha. I don't think that it was so very crucial in the financial sense, all the more because international organizations offer support, and there were donors. People even joke that the Chernobyl power plant is sometimes the only thing that prevented us from being forgotten entirely in the international arena.

It's a modern reserve, of the sort that no longer exists anywhere in the world, or at least it seems that way to me. It would have made sense, but unfortunately it didn't happen, and now I think it's too late. And I think eventually it will all fade away. There are different theories: people will be allowed into a certain portion of the Zone, for example, but the city of Pripyat will vanish.



Chernobyl. Photo: Stefan Krasowski. Source: [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/stefan_krasowski/)

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