

Chernobyl Horror Film Called Disrespectful, A Joke

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With a slogan of "Experience the fallout," the "Chernobyl Diaries" has unsurprisingly been called tasteless.

LOS ANGELES — Horror film "Chernobyl Diaries," with its ghostly tale of terror near the infamous, abandoned nuclear plant hits theaters after protests that it sensationalizes a disaster that had tragic human consequences.

But filmmaker Oren Peli, best known as the creator of the "Paranormal Activity" horror franchise, defends his movie by calling it a horror film meant to entertain and never offend. And he does have some support from outside groups.

Still, as with many other films that use real events or people on which to base fictional horror stories — "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," to name just one — "Chernobyl Diaries" has sparked concern, leading to petitions and calls for boycotts.

Yago Alayza, a Florida-based graphic designer, created one of two existing petitions on Change.org and started another on Facebook after viewing advertisements for the film.

"Seeing teenagers taking a vacation at Chernobyl, as if they were going to Disney World, shocked me deeply," he said. "Anyone visiting Chernobyl should have the same respect as if they were visiting Auschwitz or the Khmer Rouge Museum in Cambodia."

Alayza, who has not yet seen the film, also takes issue with the poster and its slogan: "Experience the Fallout." "Honestly, who wants to experience a fallout? Do the filmmakers really know what that means? They are making a real horror situation into a joke. This is pure indifference to the reality of the tragedy."

"Chernobyl Diaries" takes place in the Ukrainian ghost town of Prypiat, a city that once housed workers of the Chernobyl power plant. It was abandoned in 1986 after one of the nearby reactors exploded, causing a nuclear plant accident unrivaled until 2011's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan.

Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are still dealing with the radiation exposure, which has been linked to death, chronic health issues and birth deformities among thousands of people.

The film, however, tells the fictional tale of a group of vacationers who ignore warnings and go into Prypiat only find themselves trapped and, of course, not alone. As their numbers dwindle, the group must find a way to escape while fighting off their mysterious attackers, who may or may not be human

Robert Schuettepelz, the executive director of the Wisconsin-based survivors' support group Friends of Chernobyl Centers, said his organization is against the whole premise of the film.

"It is insensitive to the thousands of people who either lost their lives, were uprooted from their homes, or who were severely impacted medically, emotionally or economically," he said. "This is especially true given the fact that thousands of people continue to this day to recover and overcome the devastation they experienced."

Peli defends the movie by saying that it's just a film and that he doesn't find it offensive.

"It's obviously a fictionalized movie," he said. "We're not trying to say this is a serious documentary or anything like that."

Peli said that when he first heard of Prypiat, he was struck by the fact that people didn't even have a chance to pick up their stuff and left full apartments with personal photos and other memorabilia lying around.

"I found it very sad and fascinating and eerie and creepy," he said. "I thought it would be a great setting for a scary horror film. It was never our intention to offend anyone."

Peli does have support from the New York-based group Chabad's Children of Chernobyl, for whom he screened the film.

"I don't look at the film as a negative and say 'Oh, my God, there are mutants running around; how could you make fun of them?'" said Esti Herman, the organization's executive director.

"In real life, these people are sick and they've been thrust aside. A lot of them are institutionalized because their parents can't deal with their deformities," Herman said. "Our organization is going to use the film as a springboard to create awareness, to raise money to save the children."

Herman hopes the movie will raise curiosity about the disaster and spur people to look at it again.

Peli said sparking awareness is fine with him.

"But I'm not going to pretend that was my main goal," he said. "My main goal was to create a movie that people will find entertaining and scary and will enjoy."

In fact, Hollywood for years has been using real events as the basis for horror flicks and, in many cases, pleasing fans.

Ryan Turek, managing editor of horror movie website Shock Till You Drop, cited films like "The Amityville Horror" or "The Hills Have Eyes," which was about a family living near a nuclear testing site, as examples. "Chernobyl Diaries," he said, has familiar movie plot twists and a structure that people will distinguish as fictional.

"Cinema is feeding off unfortunate events all the time," he said.

Still, Alayza and others would at least like to see proceeds of the film donated to the victims of Chernobyl, and without being able to stop the film, they seem to know the best they can hope for is that "Chernobyl Diaries" can be used as a learning tool about the threat of nuclear disasters.

On that last point, the protesters and filmmaker agree.

"If people are honestly concerned about nuclear power and the effects," Peli said, "they can embrace the fact that now it could be a topic of discussion and used for a positive sense."

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