



Department of International Relations and Regional Studies
College of Social Sciences

**Remembering Life in the Soviet Thaw on Russian Television:
The Case of ‘Mysterious Passion’ Television Series**

CEERES Master’s Thesis

Maryam Agharabi

GUIDE: 2562830A - KIMEP: 20211483

Supervisors:

Dr. Gulnara Dadabayeva, KIMEP University

Dr. Elena Pavlova, University of Tartu

August 2023

Almaty, Kazakhstan

Field of Studies:

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts (MA) in International Relations:

KIMEP University, Kazakhstan

International Master's (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies:
University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian
Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count of the thesis: 24,227

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Maryam Agharabi, 28.08.2023

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Introduction

Nostalgia for the Soviet Past

Nostalgia for the USSR has been an enduring phenomenon in Post-Soviet Russia. Extensive surveys carried out over the past decades have consistently underscored that a substantial segment of the population regrets the collapse of the Soviet Union, a sentiment even noticeable among the younger generation who lack direct experience of Soviet life. The point of departure for this thesis is a curiosity about these enduring nostalgic sentiments, how these memories are constructed, and if and how they are reinforced by mass media. Drawing from an extensive body of scholarly works in the field of cultural memory, which briefly put, is the study of *'how the past is created and recreated within the sociocultural context'*¹, especially those works highlighting the distinctive role of audio-visual mediums in negotiating and shaping shared historical memory, this thesis will examine the interplay between these nostalgic sentiments on the one hand and the representations of the everyday life during the Soviet past on Television, on the other.

For a brief exploration of the state of the romanticization of the Soviet past, recurring survey results published by the Levada Center offer a good place to start. These surveys consistently demonstrate the enduring strength of Soviet Nostalgia among Russians— In 2020, 75% of the population, up from 66% in 2018, believed that the Soviet era has been the best time in the history of the country². Both these recurring surveys of the Levada Center as well as the publications by the scholars who have worked with similar data released by either Levada

¹ Erll, "Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies," 303.

² Levada Center, "Three-quarters of Russians consider the Soviet era the best in the history of the country"; reviewed in Vedomosti, "Russians consider the Soviet era the best in the history of the country."

or the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) since the mid-1990s ³, have discussed the primary reasons given by the respondents for their positive perception of life during the time of the Soviet Union. These factors, which in this research will be referred to as *attributes*, generally fall under three broad categories:

- 1) Economic attributes: Strong public services such as free education and healthcare, affordable housing, childcare, guaranteed jobs, an overall sense of economic stability,
- 2) Socio-cultural attributes: Closer relations between people, a great sense of mutual trust, closer family ties, a sense of social stability, higher social values, and,
- 3) Identity attributes: A sense of pride, especially because of the victory in WWII, a sense of belonging to a great power, and a prevailing culture of sacrifice for the motherland.

As noted in a subsequent 2021 survey, no major changes are observed in these trends and the respondents still point to several similar attributes such as perceived economic stability, social trust, closer family ties, and a sense of ‘being at home across the Soviet landscape’ as the main reasons driving this sense of longing (See figure 1) ⁴.

³ Such as Lee, “Nostalgia as a Feature of ‘Glocalization’: Use of the Past in Post-Soviet Russia”; Mazur, “Golden Age Mythology and the Nostalgia of Catastrophes in Post-Soviet Russia”; Kalinina, “Beyond Nostalgia for the Soviet Past.”

⁴ Levada Center, “Nostalgiya po SSSR [Nostalgia for the USSR].”

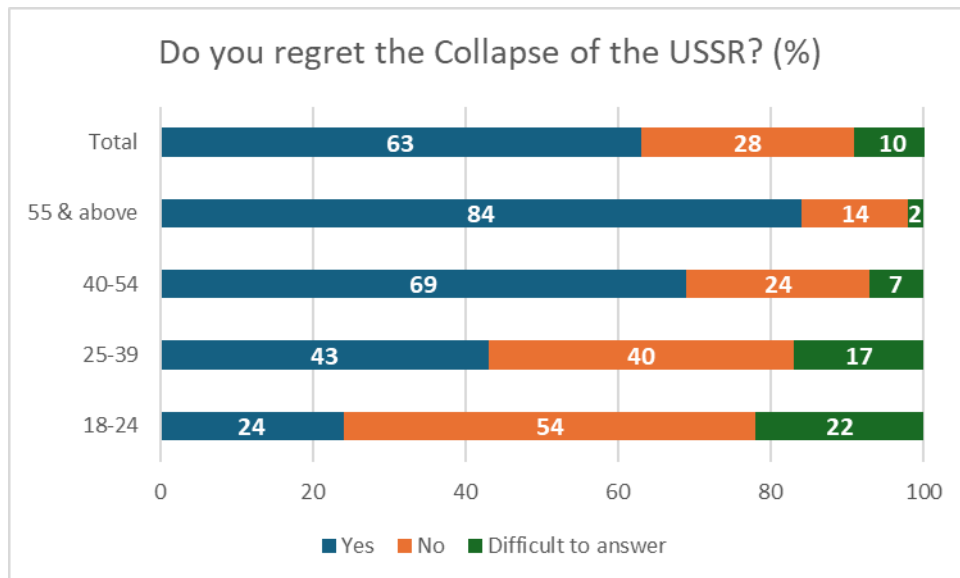


Figure 1. Population sentiment toward the collapse of USSR in different age categories. Source: Levada Center, 2021

While various media contribute to the landscape of cultural memory, television stands out as a powerful tool for presenting historical narratives to broad audiences, with a high potential of both echoing and influencing the people’s perceptions of the past events on a large scale ⁵. This perspective has acted as a unifying frame of thought in many works exploring themes like identity, nationhood, and collective memory in modern-day Russia ⁶. Since nostalgia inherently revolves around an idealized *golden era* in the past, television programs that portray the Soviet past's perceived glorious days are exceptionally fitting subjects for examining the possible linkages between televised representations and the public's nostalgic yearnings. Central to this exploration is the recognition that television, being a compelling

⁵ Among many others, Hagedoorn, “Television as a Hybrid Repertoire of Memory”; Ames, *Small Screen, Big Feels*; Hagedoorn, “Cultural Memory and Screen Culture”; Laks, “On Longing for Loss”; Pajala, “Television as an Archive of Memories?”

⁶ Among many others, White, McAllister, and Oates, “Was It Russian Public Television That Won It?”; Oates, “The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media”; Hutchings and Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia*; Lipman, “Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia”; Dubin, *Russia of the 2000s*; Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television*; Cottiero et al., “War of Words.”

medium, has the potential to evoke powerful emotional responses by depicting the cherished aspects of a past era and omitting the unpleasant episodes.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that generally, films and series about the Soviet period make a very popular genre on Russian television. While the majority of previous studies on film and television in contemporary Russia have focused on the depiction of the second World War and how they evoke senses of national pride, unity, culture of sacrifice and a sense of belonging to a great power, or on the representations of the Soviet past through political television programs such as talk shows and roundtables, the recently emerged genre of Thaw period-dramas that focus on the aspects of *everyday life* during a *golden age* of the Soviet period are the most suitable subjects that can allow studying possible linkages between the representations of the everyday life on television and the prevailing nostalgic recollections in relation to the social, cultural and economic attributes. The recent Thaw genre dramas started with the series “the Thaw” (Оттепель) in 2013 and have continued with multiple similar period-drama productions that illustrate the everyday life of the Soviet citizens during these years. In this context, the period drama series Mysterious Passion which captures the lives of iconic literary and artistic figures from the period of the late 1950s and into the 1960s Soviet Russia has been chosen for this case study, the reasons for which are further elaborated on in Chapter 2. Through a comprehensive analysis that examines both the series' portrayals of this particular time period on the one hand, and the diverse reactions among the audiences triggered by these representations on the other, this study aims to explore the dynamics of cultural memory within the realm of non-journalistic televised narratives that focus on everyday life in this period. This is paired with an assumption that audio-visual storytelling and historical fiction films occupy a unique and influential position in the landscape of historical representation, and the capacity for implicit messaging and shaping or reshaping memory of the past paired with a unique myth-making ability endows period-dramas with the power to

wield significant influence on the ways in which society remembers and interacts with its past collectively ⁷. This potential sets period-dramas apart from other televised formats of dissemination of historical knowledge, such as news hours, historical documentaries, or overtly political talk shows. The higher level of emotional engagement of the audience with televised films and series that offer historical narratives is a factor that contributes to their high-level impact.

Having said that, it is also important to acknowledge that television productions are not unilateral. While the editorial authority of the media is unquestionable, it should be considered that the media also try to cater to the public's expectations, simply because aligning their content with the preferences of the audience is one way to retain popularity and reach. These dynamics are further discussed in the second chapter under the premises of Agenda Setting Theory which in part guides this thesis. This means that there is always an ongoing negotiation between the media, particularly within the context of a popular period-drama on a federal TV channel with a substantial viewership which is the subject of this thesis, and the public. This negotiation involves the media presenting a certain historical narrative, while the public bring their own outlook, experiences, and shared memories of the past, as well as their understandings gained from other mediated or direct sources. This interplay results in a synthesis that blends elements from various narratives and perspectives. Ultimately, these negotiations do not culminate in a singular convergence, but rather foster a polyphonic environment with ongoing fluidity and evolution on the part of collective memory as a whole.

⁷ Plantinga, "Collective Memory and the Rhetorical Power of the Historical Fiction Film."

Research Questions

With these understandings in mind and considering the literature that emphasizes television's role as a major contributor to collective cultural memory, this study aims to examine both the portrayal and reception of everyday life during the golden era of the Thaw as represented in the television drama series “Mysterious Passion”. A major production aired on Russia's Perviy Kanal in 2016, the series garnered much anticipation with a year-long pre-release advertisement campaign as well as its unique theme of showcasing the lives of a group of real-life, iconic figures from the forefronts of the literary and artistic scene of the Thaw period. The study aims to address two main research questions:

RQ1: How does the television series *Mysterious Passion* depict the fabric of everyday life during the Thaw period, particularly within the context of the aforementioned themes of nostalgia?

RQ2: How has the audience responded to the television series concerning its representation of everyday life during the Thaw period?

In this exchange between the media and the public, and considering the significance of comprehending not only the overall sentiment of the audience toward the series, but also the underlying rationales for their reactions (be it positive or negative), the second research question can be further dissected into two subsidiary questions:

RQ2-1: Considering the themes of nostalgia, what are the prevailing emotional dispositions within the audience's reactions to the series' depiction of everyday life?

RQ2-2: What are the central motifs that emerge from the audience's affirmative or negative stance toward these televised representations?

Studying the series' reception through the two-part second research question provides an avenue to understand not only the general direction of the interplay between the public's existing memory on the one hand, and the television's place as a vessel for cultural memory on the other, but it also helps better understand why the public have reacted to the series in certain ways. Ultimately, this will allow for an exploration of whether, and to what extent, a major production such as the selected case may contribute to the ongoing processes and dynamics of collective memory.

Research Structure

The first chapter of this study serves as an introduction to the general premises of the research topic, key concepts, and research background. It starts by exploring the fundamental concepts of history, collective and cultural memory, nostalgia, and their interconnectedness within the context of memory studies research, as understanding the dynamics between these elements is essential for comprehending how collective memory is (re)shaped and preserved over time. The chapter then explores the relationship between cultural memory and *television culture*, with a particular focus on non-journalistic television content as influential tools for narrating the past. Additionally, the role of television in Russian society is examined based on established literature, which emphasize its impact on shaping public memory.

The second chapter proceeds to detail the methodology employed in this research. It outlines the broad approach of the study borrowed from the theoretical premises of Agenda Setting Theory nested in Political Communications, and then introduces the methods that are employed to answer the two research questions, namely, narrative analysis of the film nested in critical discourse analysis as an approach to address the subject of the first question about the representations in the television series, and secondly, thematic analysis of the reception data

gathered from online sources that will help answer the second question on the reception of the series among the audiences. This chapter concludes by discussing the rationale for case selection, clarifying the significance of the chosen television series "The Mysterious Passion" as a subject suitable for examining the interactions between television and the public in the landscape of collective cultural memory.

The Third chapter revolves around the study of the television series itself. This section commences with an introduction to the selected case and its background as being based on a novel, providing context for the subsequent narrative and reception analyses. The series serves as a significant subject for examination due to its portrayal of the widely recognized iconic characters in literature and arts scene of the 1960s in a fictional storyline and its potential influence on or clashes with the public memory. Following the introductory section, the chapter offers first an analysis of the television series, examining how it depicts everyday life during the Soviet Thaw period, focusing particularly on representations of the identified attributes of economic, social, and cultural nature as outlined above, which contribute to the making of a nostalgic take on everyday life during the past era. Moving forward, the focus shifts to analyzing the reception data, based on user reviews obtained from online review platforms, to gain an insight into how the television series has been received by the audience. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the agenda setting role of television within the context of this case study, and if and how television has been able to influence the public memory in present-day Russia with regards to the everyday life during a *golden* bygone era.

Chapter 1: Premises of the Study

1.1 Memory and Nostalgia

The ways in which societies remember, commemorate, and interpret the past involves a selective process of choosing which events and figures are celebrated, condemned, or forgotten, and how they are remembered in public discourse, cultural productions, and historical narratives. The processes through which a society's collective memory operate are important because they not only shape its collective identity and worldview, reflecting its values, beliefs, and goals, but they also have a significant influence on decision making processes, affecting its present and future. It is because of its socio-political implications and contribution to the identity, values and goals of a community that collective memory is always a contested area, and different actors ranging from the media or state to a variety of elite and interest groups are always at work, competing for a larger share in defining the trajectories of public memory and narratives of the past.

While the use of the term *Collective Memory* and studying it as a modern subject of inquiry goes back to the 1920s and the works of Aby Warburg and Maurice Halbwachs ⁸, and similarly, studying the role of the media in manufacturing consent and public opinion goes back to Walter Lippman's 1922 work on Public Opinion and the role of the Press ⁹, it is in the post-WWII era and thanks to the memory studies boom of the post-1980s that scholars have begun to differentiate between the various ways in which communities develop collective modes of remembering and engaging with the past. Building upon Halbwachs' understanding of collective memory as a social phenomenon closely linked to communication and group dynamics, while showcasing how memory is influenced by our interactions with others and the

⁸ Erll, *Memory in Culture*.

⁹ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

communities we belong to, Aleida and Jan Assmann ¹⁰ have taken Halbwachs' study of collective memory one step further by defining the dynamics of memory in relation to time, identity, and the role of the carriers of memory. Acknowledging the different levels at which memory operates, they help us distinguish between communicative memory, as a non-institutionalized form of shared memory that is transferred from one generation to the next, as opposed to cultural memory, which is institutionalized, and mediated through carriers or sites of memory available to the public (See table 1)¹¹.

Level	Time	Identity	Memory
inner (neuro-mental)	inner, subjective time	inner self	Individual memory
social	social time	social self, person as carrier of social roles	communicative memory
cultural	historical, <i>mythical</i> , cultural time	Cultural identity	Cultural memory

Table 1. Individual, Communicative, & Cultural Memory, Source: Assman, J. (2008) ¹²

In this categorization, **Communicative** memory, which resembles Halbwachs' view of collective memory, is time-dependent and gets handed down across generations. In contrast, **Cultural** memory extends across time, reaching deep into distant historical periods. Just like communicative memory, cultural memory also serves as a bonding agent, but it is also a vessel of narratives that span the expanse of time, allowing for emergence of what Jan Assmann calls *Mythical* history (See Table 2).

¹⁰ Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity"; Assmann, "Canon and Archive"; Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory."

¹¹ Although it has become a tradition to use the classification proposed by Assmann and Czaplicka to distinguish between these two forms of collective memory, noting the distinction by itself is by no means a novelty. See for example: Foucault, "Film and Popular Memory (Interview)." From 1975.

¹² Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory."

	Communicative Memory	Cultural Memory
Content	history in the frame of autobiographical memory, recent past	mythical history, events in absolute past
Forms	informal traditions and genres of everyday communication	high degree of formation, ceremonial communication
Media	living, embodied memory, communication in vernacular language	mediated in texts, icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds; “classical” or otherwise formalized language(s)
Time Structure	80-100 years, a moving horizon of 3-4 interacting generations	absolute past, mythical primordial time, “3000 years”

Table 2. Content, form, Time Span and Media for Communicative & Cultural Memory, Source: Assman, J. (2008) ¹³

Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory is the part of collective remembering that does not require the existence of a human narrator or a storyteller from the older generation, or an eyewitness, and is instead mediated by carriers of memory such as novels, monuments, pictures, films, TV productions, and so on ¹⁴. In other words, cultural memory can be defined as a product of a socially constructed and mediated process that involves the production, transmission, and reception of cultural narratives and representations of the past. This would also mean that cultural memory is not a fixed entity, but is constantly evolving and contested, subject to ongoing negotiations and struggles over the meanings and significance of past events. Astrid Erll points out that Jan Assmann's definition of cultural memory offers valuable insights for scholars in the field of memory studies, since it encompasses several significant attributes, including the role of cultural memory in shaping collective identity, its reflexivity which mirrors the self-image of the group, its retrospective nature, reliance on established communication methods, and institutionalization ¹⁵. However, she notes that despite being a significant advancement from Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, the application of

¹³ Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory.”

¹⁴ Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*.

¹⁵ Erll, *Memory in Culture*.

Assmann's classification has its limitations. She notes, for example, that *'in a given historical context, the same event can become simultaneously an object of the Cultural Memory and of the communicative memory (31)'*. With the advances in scholarly work in this field, many scholars ¹⁶ have started to use terms such as public memory, collective memory, collective remembrance, and cultural memory interchangeably. In the context of the present study, my use of the terms collective memory and cultural memory will be treated as interchangeable, based on the understanding that all public and collective forms of memory transmissions are in one way or another mediated and cultural in nature.

Nostalgia, on the other hand, can be defined as a sense of longing for a narrated or fictitious version of the past, or very simply put, *'a time that never was'* ¹⁷. Viewing it as an epidemic defensive response to the challenges of a fast-paced globalized world, Svetlana Boym defines Nostalgia as *'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed... a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. (13)'* ¹⁸ Nostalgia is a form of reaction that can occur toward all sorts of individual or collective memory. As such, it is important to note that in both cases of collective memory and collective nostalgia, emotional involvement and responses play a key role, and that similar to collective memory, the collective sense of nostalgia can also lead to certain social or political outcomes. Both are also time and disruption dependent, meaning that a temporal distance and a sense of discontinuity from past events are essential to the making of both. If the events are too distant, the emotional engagement of the group may diminish, and the events may be perceived as purely historical rather than emotionally relevant. On the other hand, if the events are too recent, they may be perceived as mere news, lacking the reflective perspective that comes with the passage of time.

¹⁶ For example in Schudson, "Journalism as a Vehicle of Non-Commemorative Cultural Memory"; Isurin, *Collective Remembering*; Wertsch and Roediger, "Collective Memory."

¹⁷ Sielke, "Retro Aesthetics, Affect, and Nostalgia Effects in Recent US-American Cinema."

¹⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

The key here is to have enough temporal distance combined with elements or instances of change between the past memory and the present time for the dynamics of memory and nostalgia to work. These elements not only place the object of memory or nostalgia in the *past*, but also disrupt the sense of continuity, which is why significant events such as revolutions, wars, or different forms of catastrophe can quickly create a sense of a "past" that is not too distant in terms of years, yet it is distinctly different in its qualities. This disruption in the continuous perception of reality creates a sense of "then" and "now" which can always get weighed against each other in the imagination of individuals and groups, and allows the act of remembering the time prior to the disruption to become a contested subject among the group members^{19 20}. In light of these common characteristics, and for the scope of this study, I will consider collective nostalgia as an extension of collective memory, but specifically in cases where it elicits intense positive emotions and idealizes its referent object.

1.2 Memory and History

The methods of engagement of contemporary societies with their historical legacies hold a unique character in our time. In order to build a framework to understand the complex dynamics of the interaction of human societies with their past, French historian François Hartog delineates three distinct "regimes of historicity"²¹. He distinguishes each of these three by the point of reference for remembering and imagining and the goal of recalling the past; The earliest one of these regimes, according to Hartog, has existed since antiquity until the French

¹⁹ This case of major disruptions is very close to the notion of a *Blackout* as described by Joan Grossman. Grossman defines a moment of Blackout in a society as '*a space of memory and thinking that collapses with catastrophe and falls into a stupor.*' See: Grossman, *On Memory and Catastrophe*.

²⁰ To link this back to the emotional engagement factor shared between memory and nostalgia, Oleg Gorbachev also notes, '*Deep emotions are invoked when a gap exists between the "happy past" and the unsatisfactory present (182)*'. See Gorbachev, "The Namedni Project and the Evolution of Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Russia."

²¹ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

revolution, and is mainly concerned with the history of an idealized past, great heroic stories, and mythical accounts, the focus of which is in the past itself. This means the past worked as a point of reference for understanding the present time, and the present was imagined as being situated along the way on a continuous line that began in the past. Beginning with the French Revolution, he places the second regime of historicity between 1789 and 1989, where all past and present events are directed toward a particular, progressive, and idealistic *Future* for the humanity. In the second regime's Futurism, the order of time appears to be accelerating constantly, and History in this period is made and written in the name of the future, as seen in '*the Communist Manifesto or Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto (107)*.' This Futurism, Hartog argues, gradually gave its place to a focus on the Present, building a third regime, which exclusively considers the Present as the reference point for interpretation, comprehension, and dealing with both the Past and the Future. As opposed to the first regime where the present was interpreted based on the past history, now it is the past that is being appropriated and interpreted based on the present. This is the period in which public memory becomes increasingly important and contested, as a variety of historical narratives and decisions about what to remember and what to forget based on present needs collide with each other. Russian historian Ivan Kurilla explains that for Hartog, Presentism simply refers to a situation that occurred at the end of the twentieth century in which the past and future lost their independent meanings and were subordinated to the present^{22 23}. Both Kurilla and Henry Rousso agree that Hartog's concept of Presentism has a lot to do with any given society's mass inability to come to terms

²² Kurilla, "Istoriya kak Yazyk Politiki (History as the Language of Politics)."

²³ This late 20th-century state of continuous uncertainty, disassociation and instability is also observed and extensively discussed by Zygmunt Bauman, particularly in a host of his works starting from **Liquid Modernity** (2000) and ending with **Retrotopia** (2017). Bauman argues that unlike the earlier phases of modernity, the later, *liquid* modernity, which is a product of economic globalization, no longer offers any solid ground, foundations, values, norms, any methods of control or response or visible comprehensible processes to the contemporary human subjects and as such, forces the people, who are terrified by this lightness and the dizzying speed of change and can't imagine anything to hold on to, to run to the past, where an imaginary 'Retrotopia' is located, shaped by '*selective memorizing and selective forgetting*', and a promise of finally reconciling security with freedom (in a Freudian sense).

with a traumatic past and link it to the concept of *historical trauma*, which is often visited by the scholars of memory studies²⁴. Rousso describes the second half of the twentieth century as a time when major monuments and sites of memory, commemorations of mass mourning, and *'the first large-scale public policies of memory (144)'* led to the construction of a collective memory of a recent traumatic past that was no longer allowed to fade from the masses' consciousness. *'The major catastrophes of the twentieth century'*, he writes, *'produced new historiographical figures that kept the near past alive and rooted it in the social imaginary (144)'*²⁵. This inability to detach from the past simply prevented post-war societies from being able to emotionally distance themselves from the trauma. These emotional involvements are where Kurilla draws a line between history and memory—That is, the level of collective emotional involvement acts as a key dividing line for categorizing subjects or events under history or memory²⁶. The Presentism that keeps us focused on negotiation and appropriation of the past for present time help elicit strong emotional reactions to figures of memory—A feature that is absent when we are dealing with abstract historical accounts. This is not to say that history and public memory are two distinct fields; rather, the concept of Presentism helps us understand one of the causes of the overlap felt between the two, as well as the recent scholarly trend of paying more attention to the subject of collective memory.

Hartog acknowledges that in developing the concept of Presentism he is drawing on the work of other historians and philosophers, including Paul Ricoeur's discussion on the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. In "Memory, History, Forgetting", Ricoeur praises Maurice Halbwachs' work "The Collective Memory" for his *'bold intellectual decision to attribute memory directly to a collective entity'* and for reminding us that *'to remember, we need others*

²⁴ Kurilla, "Presentism, Politicization of History, and the New Role of the Historian in Russia."

²⁵ Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*.

²⁶ Kurilla, "Presentism, Politicization of History, and the New Role of the Historian in Russia."

(120)' ²⁷. For Ricoeur, the self is contingent to the collective memory, and '*collective memory... constitutes the soil in which historiography is rooted* (69)' ²⁸. He borrows from Freud's conceptualizations of mourning and melancholia to describe the present state of what he calls a collective *wounded* memory and to distinguish between the liberating effects of everyday memory and remembering (which he attributes to the process of mourning) as opposed to manipulated or forced memory, that is subject to constant meddling and abuse by external forces. For Ricoeur, this is where memory becomes the object of political and ideological manipulation, and the crossover between memory and identity happens, forcing a community to identify with and to *become* the officially endorsed historiographical account of its past, which in his view causes a sense of public melancholia. This is also why for Ricoeur, collective memory is always in conversation with loss and trauma, whether it is about the loss of a happy, glorious past, or about coming to terms with the memory of a traumatic past event.

In all these works and many others, the academic fascination with collective memory in our time and its increasing significance have been attributed to a variety of factors, most notably the experiences of collective trauma, but also construction of sites of memory and commemorations which in most cases pin a certain narrative of the past in present and don't allow the public to distance itself from it. One less-discussed factor, however, is the nature of the *collective* itself. Even in phenomenological discussions, the collective is mostly treated as an extension of the individuals that form a community, with a few extra attributes including the politicality of this larger form of being. It must be noted then, as a footnote, that irrespective of the specific timeframe when "collective" memory emerged as a significant subject of academic inquiry, or its relations with power, the essence of collective imagination, shared identity, and the construction of a shared past are inherent to the modern composition of human societies

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 120.

²⁸ Ricoeur, 69.

that allow for, among other things, shared political consciousness. It is in these modern *imagined communities*²⁹ that having a collective understanding of any given subject or having shared, albeit conflicting and contested, memories, or multiple competing narratives instead of an official, dominant, authoritative account of history, make sense and can subsequently have any social, cultural, or political implications. It is within the anatomy of modern human societies, with the agency and imagination of modern human subjects, as observed for instance in the conceptualization of Sociological Imagination by Wright Mills³⁰, and in the subsequent polyphony that shapes these shared or at times conflicting ideas about the past, that it becomes possible to have a collective memory, and it is perhaps only natural that this would later become a focal point for social scientists³¹. The advent and proliferation of modern media further facilitate the dissemination, transfer, and contestation of these ideas. From this point of view, the line between history as an academic discipline and memory studies gets further blurred. If history was once written by victors or was treated as a subject confined to an environment accessible to only a select few, the empowerment of human subjects during the past few centuries, especially during the post-WWII era, and the resulting polyphonic dynamics, paired with accessibility of means of communications, have made it easier for the domain to accommodate rivalling narratives and diversified accounts, and consequently, made it only logical for a field like memory studies to gain momentum.

²⁹ Concept borrowed from Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

³⁰ Wright Mills defines Sociological Imagination as a modern phenomenon that allows the human subjects to use their imagination and make connections between their personal challenges and social issues. According to him, ‘*The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society (6).*’ See Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*.

³¹ See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*., especially her 1961 essay titled “The Crisis in Culture”, for a discussion on the post-WWII transition from the binary understanding of “High Culture” vs. meritless “Mass Culture” toward the rise of academic interest in the latter, labeled by Harold Rosenberg, according to Arendt, as “**intellectualization of kitsch**”- a shift in perspective that points to the important socio-political implications attributed to mass culture.

1.3 Television & Televised Fiction

Among the carriers of cultural memory, television occupies a unique and significant position ³². Throughout the world and for many decades, television has been one of the most accessible media, widely available, and often free-to-air requiring minimal equipment. While other media and tools such as books, oral traditions, museums, and monuments play crucial roles in preserving, commemorating, and transmitting memory, television possesses unparalleled reach and influence. It has the power to shape public opinion, influence public debate, and disseminate historical knowledge in a variety of formats to a wide audience. Through films, television series, documentaries, news broadcasts, talk shows, and other audio-visual content, television actively contributes to setting the agenda for the public in how and what to remember from their past. Additionally, unlike other carriers of memory, television is an industry that is explicitly designed around the idea of shaping public discourse, catering to the masses, and influencing society's perspectives. Television stations, their producers, writers, and other crew create a powerful group that possess the authority in selecting, producing, and airing content that keeps the audiences engaged with certain topics, evokes emotions, and contributes to the formation of ideas, values, political views, patterns of behavior, and relevant to this study- their collective memory of the past. The industry's scale and infrastructure allow for the creation and dissemination of narratives on a massive scale through a combination of visuals, audio, and storytelling techniques that can leave a lasting impact on the viewers' understanding and interpretation of any issue, including those that have to do with history. While particularly in political communications, academic inquiry into the position and role of television in modern societies have mainly focused on direct political messaging or framing and priming of certain issues and discarding others mainly through news networks and political

³² Pajala, "Television as an Archive of Memories?"; Hagedoorn, "Television as a Hybrid Repertoire of Memory"; Hagedoorn, "Cultural Memory and Screen Culture."

talk shows, the extent to which television is capable of influencing society and public opinion is certainly not limited to these journalistic contents.

In recent years, the authority and relevance of television has been questioned at times, and it is often assumed that internet resources and streaming services have emerged as formidable contenders to traditional television. It is indeed correct that with the advent of digital technologies and the widespread availability of high-speed internet, online platforms have gained immense popularity and are increasingly challenging the dominance of traditional TV. However, a few considerations should be noted:

First off, while it is true that the younger generation, especially Generation Z, tends to prefer online sources and social media for news and information, which renders traditional television news broadcasts less popular among them, the *narrow-casting* feature of internet resources as opposed to the *broadcasting* quality of television shouldn't be forgotten³³. In this sense, television's ability to reach mass audiences remains unmatched by any online platform.

Secondly, it is true that online and streaming platforms have become a significant source of entertainment, rivalling traditional television in offering a wide range of films and series that are accessible on-demand globally and catering mostly to the turn-of-century generation and the millennials, a trend that saw a particular peak during the COVID19 pandemic³⁴. But this appeal is also precisely thanks to the characteristics of the entertainment culture that was developed long before on and through television. Scholars have noted that despite the digital boom, what can be referred to as *television culture*, in terms of the form and content of the audio-visual products consumed by the public inclusive of the younger generations, particularly with regards to films and series, remains as strong as before³⁵. In this sense, digital

³³ Morozov, *The Net Delusion*.

³⁴ Ryu and Cho, "The Entertainment Industry during (and after) COVID-19."

³⁵ Podara and Kalliri, "Defining TV Watching Experience."

streaming or other new platforms can be considered as yet another step in the overall evolution of *television culture* since its inception ³⁶. Relevant to this, it is also noted that especially among the younger viewers, there is a preference for micro-content or *snackable* content ³⁷, which aligns with shorter-form media consumption habits. This shift in preference has led to a decline in interest in traditional cinema and feature films, with serialized films gaining more popularity. Many of these popular television series often act as social surrogates, creating a sense of belonging and fostering connections with the characters and their lives. Typically, many of the most popular serialized films follow a small group of friends, showcasing their experiences and adventures, which not only resonate with the audience's desire for relatable and engaging content, but also create parasocial relationships, offer their viewers a sense of belonging, and help them escape senses of loneliness ³⁸. Watching serialized films, the audience develops a bond with the favorite characters over time, facilitated by extended storylines unique to TV series or novels ³⁹, which fulfills the viewers' need for belonging, as they perceive themselves as members of the same group as the characters. At the same time, serialized storylines on television do not only act as social surrogates, but also serve as social proxies. As a popular pastime activity, serialized films often become topics of friendly conversations among coworkers, friends, and family members, or have a similar function in online fandom platforms, due to their wide appeal and large audience. In this way, these audio-visual products, whether

³⁶ Bury, *Television 2.0*.

³⁷ Cortés Quesada, Barceló Ugarte, and Fuentes Cortina, "Audio-Visual Consumption of Millennials and Generation Z."

³⁸ The **social surrogacy hypothesis** suggests that when direct social interaction is not available, people seek temporary substitutes, or social surrogates. Over the past decade, several psychological studies have explored the application of this hypothesis to television. See for example: Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg, "Social Surrogacy: How Favored Television Programs Provide the Experience of Belonging."

³⁹ For a discussion on social surrogacy in novels see: Gabriel and Young, "Becoming a Vampire Without Being Bitten: The Narrative Collective-Assimilation Hypothesis."

on TV or on streaming platforms, not only fill the void left by the absence of social ties, but also serve as a conversation starter when a chance at social interaction is present.

1.4 Television in Russia

The general trends in Russia are similar to those of other countries, and despite the relative diversification of media consumption patterns over the last decade and the increasing popularity of social media and online platforms, television remains a strong source of information for the majority of the Russian population, with the older generation strongly leaning toward TV consumption while the younger generations choose the internet and social media as their source of news (see Table 3) ^{40 41} .

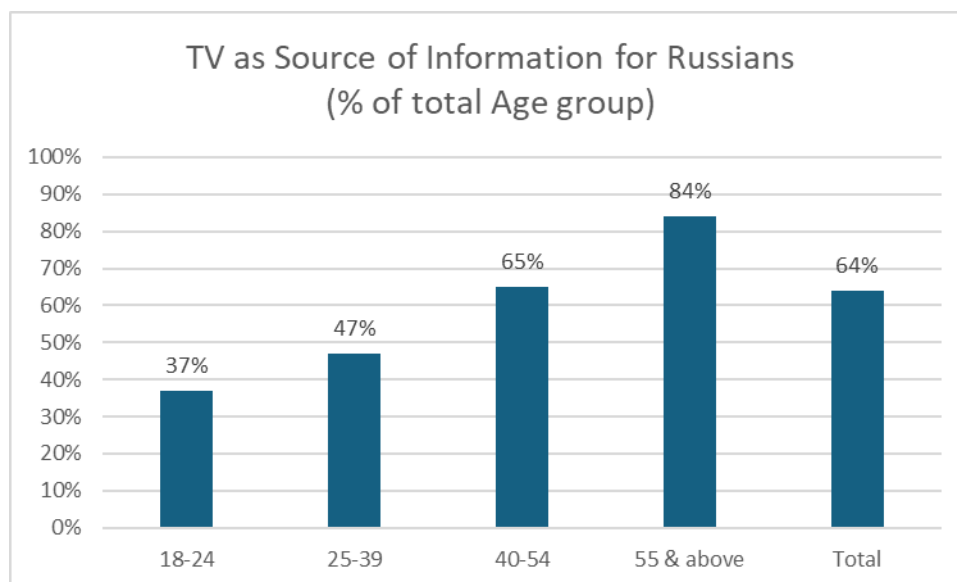


Figure 2. Percentage of Russians in Different Age Groups who choose Television as their source of Information. Source: Levada Center, 2022.

⁴⁰ Levada Center, “Osnovnyye istochniki informatsii rossiyan [The main sources of information for Russians]”; Volkov et al., “Rossiyskiy medialandshaft -2021: ispol’zovaniye i doveriye [Russian Media Landscape 2021: Usage and Trust].”

⁴¹ There are also studies that show the persistent agenda-setting power of Television in Russia at least in relation to the most important political topics. For example, in the case of Euromaidan events and annexation of Crimea, Christina Cottiero et al. have found that the narrative offered by the State-influenced TV in Russia has been successful in forging public opinion and consent. See Cottiero et al., “War of Words.”

But changing the focus from *TV as a news source* to non-journalistic programs, other surveys that have specifically covered film and TV series consumption show that watching films (feature-length or serialized) is by far the most popular leisure activity among Russians, with 53% of the population reporting that they watch movies and series every day and another 26% doing so at least once a week, bringing the total portion of *regular* film and series watchers to 79% in a hybrid world of online and offline TV (figure 3) ⁴². While online streaming TV has its own unique features and characteristics, such as the ability to watch shows on-demand and without advertisements, it shares many similarities with traditional television, meaning that in terms of cultural implications and for the purposes of this study, watching online streaming TV can be treated as an extension of television viewing culture. For the younger generations who prefer online platforms, traditional television products in the form of films or series are also available on streaming platforms, which are gaining more subscribers year after year in a market dominated by domestic companies and production houses since the departure of Western companies from Russia ⁴³.

⁴² Levada Center, “Serial’nyye budni: rossiyaane korotayut dosug pered televizorom [Serial weekdays: Russians while away their leisure time in front of the TV].”

⁴³ See Washington Post (2022) and Vedomosti (2022) on Netflix's loss of about a million subscribers caused by its exit from the Russian market, and Rambler&Co. (2022) on a surge in subscriptions to Russian online cinema (streaming) services.



Figure 3. Top leisure activities reported by Russians. Source: Levada Center (2019)

Taken together, and regardless of whether they are accessed offline or online, this pattern of leisure activities can suggest that the ability of feature-length or serialized films to shape collective perceptions and attitudes toward any subject, including historical events and issues, potentially makes television a powerful stakeholder in collective memory landscape of the Russian society. For the viewers, films and TV series that deal with a bygone era can, as William Guynn notes, evoke ‘*affective dimension of the past*’ and the ‘*atavistic emotions that belong to myth and ritual*’ (2)⁴⁴. For the elite and interest groups, they can be used to influence public opinion, shape public discourse, and reinforce certain agendas through the promotion of specific narratives of the past and suppressing or discrediting alternative ones. Many scholars who have worked on the subject of media and particularly, television in Russia⁴⁵ have noted that since the beginning of President Putin’s first term in the Kremlin, not only have new restrictive measures against the media been put in place, but there has also been a significant

⁴⁴ Guynn, *Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe*.

⁴⁵ See Oates (2007), Hutchings & Rulyova (2009), Beumers (2009), Hutchings & Tolz (2015), and Wijermars (2019).

tendency, particularly among the state-affiliated media, to pay more attention to the production of programs about Russia's history, which predominantly offer a narrative of the Tsarist or Soviet past that favors and reinforces the political agenda of the contemporary ruling elite. It is also noted that the top-performing, well-budgeted state-influenced TV channels have become increasingly narrower in their political diversity ⁴⁶.

It should be noted, however, that there is also significant popularity of, and demand for, nostalgic or "retro" type of programs within the society itself, which is by no means exclusive to Russia. As observed by Boym and Bauman ⁴⁷, we live in a historical situation where the past offers a safe destination to run to from the contemporary senses of confusion and uncertainty that reach the cores of our minds and are the dominant forces characterizing our age. Therefore, not only in Russia, but across the globe, as noted by Bauman, "Retrotopias" are emerging; '*visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past (8)*' ⁴⁸ that offer a solid ground to stand on against the image of a liquified and dismantling modernity that haunts our societies. Consequently, while there is a strong body of literature that suggest a top-down relationship between the center(s) of power and the public in Russia in terms of *memory-making* projects and representations of history on television, the popular demand for *retro* and programs depicting historical episodes on TV is a factor that must be considered while dealing with the subject of cultural memory and television. Among the earlier works on television in Russia, Oates (2007) ⁴⁹, Mickiewicz (2008) ⁵⁰, and Oates & McCormack (2010) ⁵¹ for example, have discussed the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Kremlin's approach to television in the 2000s, with a focus on the journalistic, news, and political commentary aspects of TV

⁴⁶ Particularly by Oates and McCormack, "The Media and Political Communication."

⁴⁷ See Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; Bauman, *Retrotopia*; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

⁴⁸ Bauman, *Retrotopia*.

⁴⁹ Oates, "The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media."

⁵⁰ Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*.

⁵¹ Oates and McCormack, "The Media and Political Communication."

programs, and have address a wide range of topics such as media structure and modeling, the increasingly narrow scope of news coverage, censorship of opposition voices on television, intimidation of journalists, and public opinion manipulation during election campaigns in the early to mid-2000s, centering on the same top-down relationship. Hutchings's and Rulyova⁵² have examined the development of television culture during the first two terms of Vladimir Putin's presidency. Covering reception and audience, TV programs, production, distribution, and the fabric of the industry, they define their core of findings as hidden in the subtitle of the book, "the remote control" – a metaphor for the innate constant negotiation between the two sides of television and how what they call the illusion of control and choice among the viewers is paired with the state's desire for controlling the form, content, messaging, and behavior of the medium. The authors believe that this has created a situation in which, while the contents of television programs appear increasingly Western and distanced from the Soviet style of the past, the medium as a whole is subject to constant meddling and control from the center(s) of power. Similarly, Tina Burrett's 2013 work⁵³ also focuses on Putin's first two terms as president and his relationship with television, but its case studies are structured around the editorial practices and news coverage of three elections, 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections, and the 2003 State Duma elections, on main federal channels. *Nation, Ethnicity, and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*⁵⁴ by Hutchings and Tolz continues in the footsteps of Hutchings's and Rulyova's 2009 book in both methodological and theoretical terms, studying the ups and downs of Kremlin's efforts to define Russian-ness as an ethnically inclusive identity in the multi-ethnic fabric of the Russian society, and how this gets reflected on television in a paradoxical way where on the one hand, ethnic diversity is praised as a unique

⁵² Hutchings and Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia*.

⁵³ Burrett, *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*.

⁵⁴ Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television*.

feature of the Russian society, and on the other, issues such as extremism or violence are associated with particular ethnic groups.

Departing slightly from the ontological stance of these works, Russian sociologist Boris Dubin takes on a somewhat more inclusive approach in his publication *"Russia of the 2000s: Political Culture, Historical Memory, Everyday Life"*⁵⁵, which examines how contemporary Russian society has navigated its Soviet past during the 1990s and early 2000s. He points out, for instance, the issue of Russia's relation (or lack of such relations during the later years) with a constitutive *other*, he visits important concepts from cultural trauma studies, and he looks into how the Russian media's post-2000 obsession with films and serials depicting WWII is pushing for the rise of what he calls a new Cold War mentality—a method of representation that he believes has cemented the cultural memory of the whole of the Soviet era in the 2000s, which has narrowed down decades of Soviet history and reduced it to the memory of a few *useful* episodes, such as the Great Patriotic War. Based on his experience as a chief researcher at the Levada Center, Dubin believes that many unpleasant episodes from Soviet history seem to have been wiped out of the collective memory of Russian society, and this has left the people longing for a golden age manifested in a utopian image of unity, equality, and happiness in the Soviet past. Dubin traces these phenomena back to the works of media and television which he calls a "soft iron curtain", linking them to excessive use of memory politics, and the authority of the political elite over media outlets. Interestingly, almost all these concepts are revisited over and over again by the other works published later.

Marille Wijermars' work on contemporary Russian memory politics, *"Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema, and the State"* (2019)⁵⁶, is the most recent book of this volume that deals with the subjects of power, memory, and television in Russia. While

⁵⁵ Dubin, *Russia of the 2000s*.

⁵⁶ Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*.

most of the aforementioned studies (with the exception of Dubin's) mainly focus on form, structure, and agenda setting in the journalistic aspect of television and the relationship between the Kremlin and news media, this one is a seminal work dealing directly with the themes of cultural memory that focuses on the contemporary mediated image of *Russian statehood* in the past and present, and how in her view the Russian administration under president Putin has actively sought to shape a particular narrative of a *Russian style of statesmanship* since the mid-2000s. The book dives deep into four case studies of mythmaking about Petr Stolypin, Aleksandr Nevskii, the Time of Troubles, and Ivan the Terrible. Wijermars' main discussion is on how the media, especially television, paired with political statements and even physical spaces housing new monuments, have been used to create myths and narratives around these four cases. According to her, Russian politics under Vladimir Putin heavily draws on Russian history to justify policy decisions, particularly in the context of portraying a narrative of a *Great Russia under attack* by internal and external forces. Wijermars explores the political implications of historical television programs in Russia, which she argues play a crucial role in shaping people's understanding of history and its relevance to contemporary politics. She concludes from her extensive research that in the case of Putin's administration, the state's legitimacy has been built on historical narratives, the dissemination of which relies on Television more than any other carrier of cultural memory, and therefore, controlling the past and the collective memory of the society has become critical to the state's survival.

To a large extent, the majority of the scholarly papers that deal with the themes of television, culture, and memory in Russia draw from the concepts discussed by Dubin and Wijermars. Stephen Norris's 2007 paper "*Guiding stars*"⁵⁷, for example, looks at a case of what he believes to be a defining moment for the post-Soviet cultural memory-making of

⁵⁷ Norris, "Guiding Stars: The Comet-like Rise of the War Film in Putin's Russia: Recent World War II Films and Historical Memories."

WWII, when Karen Shakhnazarov decided to re-enact the great patriotic war for the silver screen and hired Nikolai Lebedev to direct the 2002 film *Star (Zvezda)* based on Emmanuil Kazakevich's 1947 novella of the same name. The film, according to Norris, became a turning point for both Russian cinema and television, as it led to the production of 15 more films and 8 TV series on the subject of WWII within just three years. Norris, importantly, acknowledges the role of the popular demand in these exchanges and believes that this relatively swift turn toward re-enacting WWII for the Russian audience indicates a popular desire for a '*new sense of national identity*' paired with a fear of the threat that Western or American culture posed to Russian values –an idea that is also rather extensively covered by Dubin (2011). Norris notes how the shared image of heroism and the evocation of patriotic nostalgia that is present in all these productions soon coincided with the launch of Zvezda TV channel that was launched to combat '*the influence of American pop culture*' and '*soap operas from Mexico and Brazil*', the rise of Ours (Nashi) youth movement in 2005, and similar examples in which cultural memory and myth-making meet a form of national identity building effort enacted through narratives carried by the media. Further noted by Petr Kratochvíl and Gaziza Shakhanova⁵⁸ over a decade later, this patriotic turn that began this way in the early 2000s, reached its peak with the 2017 draft of the law on patriotic education.

Anatoly Khazanov's "*Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia*"⁵⁹ deals with the same themes of remembering WWII, Stalinist repression, and the unpleasant aspects of Soviet life, but from the angle of cultural trauma. Khazanov's analysis of the falling significance of the repression during the Soviet era, and the rising positive views on Stalin, paired with the glamorous, mediated

⁵⁸ Kratochvíl and Shakhanova, "The Patriotic Turn and Re-Building Russia's Historical Memory: Resisting the West, Leading the Post-Soviet East?"

⁵⁹ Khazanov, "Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)Constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia."

depictions of WWII, is a reminiscence of Dubin's arguments on the nexus of media, power, and memory and how the post-2000 Kremlin is appropriating the Soviet era through vessels of cultural memory to manufacture legitimacy for Putin's style of statesmanship. Khazanov's contribution to this debate is that he attributes at least a part of this public support to the Russian public's difficulty in coming to terms with the dark parts of history, and consequently a mass demand for softer narratives. He believes that it is not just the master narrative that runs away from objectivity –the Russian public, too, finds it difficult to accept the weight of the past trauma and as such, demands for and embraces the redacted, appropriated narrative channeled and received through the media. In a similar fashion, Anna Novikova⁶⁰ has covered the aspect of escapism from traumatic memories. She argues that the Russian state strives to create a modern national identity that is based on a mythical narrative of the USSR, and since this creation leaves many questions unanswered, it will, consequently, impede progress and realization of a modern national identity.

Difficulty in coming to terms with a traumatic past is a widely visited subject. Ilya Kalinin's "*Nostalgic Modernization: The Soviet Past as 'Historical Horizon'*"⁶¹ is another article that similar to Khazanov (2008) looks at the collective difficulty among the public in coming to terms with a traumatic past and discusses how the nostalgia for a redacted past gets *recoded* into a new form of Russian patriotism '*for which 'the Soviet' lacks any historical specificity*'. Post-2000s appropriations of the traumatic memory of the Soviet period are also visited by Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya in "*Post-Soviet Contexts and Trauma Studies*"⁶² and by Miguel Vázquez Liñán in "*Modernization and Historical Memory in Russia*"⁶³. Liñán argues that the mediated appropriation of the Soviet past is a part of the *modernization toolbox* in

⁶⁰ Novikova, "Myths about Soviet Values and Contemporary Russian Television."

⁶¹ Kalinin, "Nostalgic Modernization: The Soviet Past as 'Historical Horizon.'"

⁶² Wakamiya, "Post-Soviet Contexts and Trauma Studies."

⁶³ Liñán, "Modernization and Historical Memory in Russia."

contemporary Russia, that requires *invented traditions* as a steppingstone for defining identity and self, and for the society to be able to move forward. He later adds further observations on memory politics and the media in “*Memory wars in Russia: the Kremlin versus Memorial*”⁶⁴ where he studies the battle between the official, appropriated and mediated narrative of the Soviet past and the counter-narrative of Memorial Society that pushes for recognition of the victims of repression and their suffering. Later, he applies the earlier findings as a frame of reference ⁶⁵ to analyze ‘*the counter-revolutionary discourse of the film The Union of Salvation (Soyuz Spasenia)*’, showing how the subject of cultural memory of the Soviet past, although greatly influenced by the official narrative, remains a constant battlefield in which contestations by the non-state actors still happen.

Concluding this section, it will be helpful to take note of a few of the issues discussed so far. The first is the prevalence of nostalgia as a recurring theme in television and film which is not solely driven by memory politics, but also responds to a genuine public demand. Secondly, this demand is rooted in the broader human condition, reflecting a broader inclination to seek refuge in memories of a perceived golden age. This yearning for the past has a universal element to it and is a defining characteristic of our age. Also important to note is that while the literature under consideration consistently emphasizes the challenge of reckoning with a traumatic history, which fuels among other things the resurgence of retro-filmmaking on Russian television, this phenomenon is not exclusive to Russia, either; this, too, is a larger phenomenon and a response to the scars left by significant historical events particularly by the major events of the 20th century. Finally, amid these universal underpinnings, Russia-specific factors observed in the literature introduce added layers for consideration. These factors encompass not only the distinct characteristics of the state and policymaking, but also the fabric

⁶⁴ Liñán, “Guerras de La Memoria En Rusia.”

⁶⁵ Liñán, “Memory and Counter-Revolutionary Propaganda in Russia. A Reinterpretation of the Decembrist Movement in the Film The Union of Salvation.”

of cultural complexities, norms, values, and societal dynamics in Russia, which means it is essential to avoid oversimplification by viewing audiences as passive recipients of media influence and to recognize the dynamic agency of the populace within the processes that shape their collective memory of the past.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Case Selection

As noted by several scholars, the memory studies boom of the recent few decades has been more concerned with practice rather than methodology⁶⁶. Not only do the practitioners in the field of memory studies come from various academic fields, which has allowed them to give the field a multi-disciplinary nature, but also their methodological stances are equally diverse. Even the terminologies used to address questions of collective memory might vary depending on the scholarly background of researchers. Similar to all works that deal with memory, this study also has a somewhat multidisciplinary nature in theoretical stance as well as application of methods and borrows from cultural studies, political communications and media, film and television studies. As Astrid Erll describes it, cultural, collective or social memory research is inherently interdisciplinary, as it can incorporate themes from ‘*history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and the neurosciences, and thus bringing together the humanities, social studies, and the natural sciences in a unique way (2)*’⁶⁷.

This research is designed as a case study of an *event* within the paradigm of interpretive research to examine the applicability of a consensus found in the literature about the media’s dominant role in Russia, as well as the theoretical assertions posed about agenda setting role of the media in general, and will rely on qualitative methods in data collecting and analysis. As there are multiple possible ways of defining a case study design, it should be noted that here I rely on Ridder’s classification of a subset constructivist approach in which a case study design aims to ‘*investigate the social construction of reality and meaning (288)*’⁶⁸. The primary aim of this study is to address two interconnected research questions, focusing on both the

⁶⁶ Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method”; Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies.”

⁶⁷ Erll, “Towards a Conceptual Foundation for Cultural Memory Studies.”

⁶⁸ Ridder, “The Theory Contribution of Case Study Research Designs.”

production and reception of meanings on television ⁶⁹ associated with depiction of everyday life during the Soviet Thaw period, which I consider to be a new, particular event in the landscape of collective cultural memory in Russia.

In this context, Agenda Setting Theory, nested within the realm of political communications, will serve as the overarching theoretical frame of thought for this study. This theoretical approach allows for a way of imagining how mass media, particularly television, can influence the public by not only highlighting specific topics in public discourse but also shaping the ways in which these issues are framed and thought of. For this study, Agenda Setting Theory helps to examine whether the agenda set by the media successfully guides the public and influences their perception and interpretation of the Thaw period in specific ways. This theoretical lens will help provide valuable insights into the influence of television on public memory and its potential role in shaping collective historical understandings.

2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory (AST) is founded on several fundamental assumptions that shape its understanding of how public opinion and political priorities interact through media. One of the key assumptions is that the concerns and issues perceived by the public as important are different from the priorities of those in positions of power ⁷⁰. In other words, while policymakers may wish to advance their decisions, such as raising taxes, reducing public spending, increasing military budgets, and so forth, these priorities may not necessarily align with the demands of the general public, although gaining public support is crucial for

⁶⁹ This approach is also close to the two-staged reception analysis framework proposed by Stuart Hall in 1973: “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”; also discussed in: Baran and Davis, *Mass Communication Theory*. in 2012. In Hall’s theory, the approach is also referred to as encoding/decoding model.

⁷⁰ Zahariadis, “Setting the Agenda on Agenda Setting.”

implementing these decisions successfully, and this is why they tend to try and influence the media in using its power to frame and channel their agenda in such a way that it will be perceived by the public as a matter of urgency ⁷¹. The other assumption is that the media does not reflect reality as perceived by the public, and it has the power to, and indeed does, concentrate on a few subjects and make them appear more important than others. In this setting, the media act as gatekeepers. They are the strainers through which thousands of topics and issues get filtered and they are the ones who get to decide which one of these topics should be brought under the limelight and to the attention of the public, and which ones should be discarded, downplayed, or even completely censored. The media have an unmatched power over selection, omission, and more importantly, framing and priming of any given story. Where there are major state-influenced media, such as in the case of Russia, these dynamics would logically tend to play in favor of those in the center of power to an even a greater extent.

At the core of it, the Agenda Setting Theory, which is mainly focused on news media, asserts that the media can teach the audience *'how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news'* ⁷². For every topic that the media focuses on, McCombs and others use the term *Objects* ⁷³. Each of these Objects, however, can have many ways of looking at them. For example, within the TV genre of remembering Soviet Thaw, which is the subject of this dissertation, the Thaw can be remembered by relative socio-economic prosperity, it can be remembered by the Space Race, or just as an insignificant chapter in the history of the Cold War, and so on. In agenda setting theory, each of these characteristics that are brought to the forefront by the media are called *Object Attributes*. When

⁷¹ It is important to emphasize that, in contrast to the claims by a large portion of agenda-setting literature, this dynamic is not exclusive to democratic societies. My understanding is that the structure of this relationship is similar across different types of statehood, with the primary distinction being the degree to which public support is essential in the policymaking process.

⁷² McCombs, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion."

⁷³ "The objects are the things on which the attention of the media and the public are focused.", McCombs, 2011

the media is in the position of setting the agenda, attributes are chosen by the media and reflect their efforts in what to recall or discuss and what to forget in relation to a certain object, i.e., *how* to remember an object. This reflects the ultimate form of power that can be imagined for the mass media to possess. The same dynamics of being selective about attributes applies to the public agenda, that is, for example, what attributes to attach to an object of memory in the public discourse, and the same applies to policy agenda setting, as these three are believed to be in negotiation with each other at all times (figure 4) ⁷⁴.

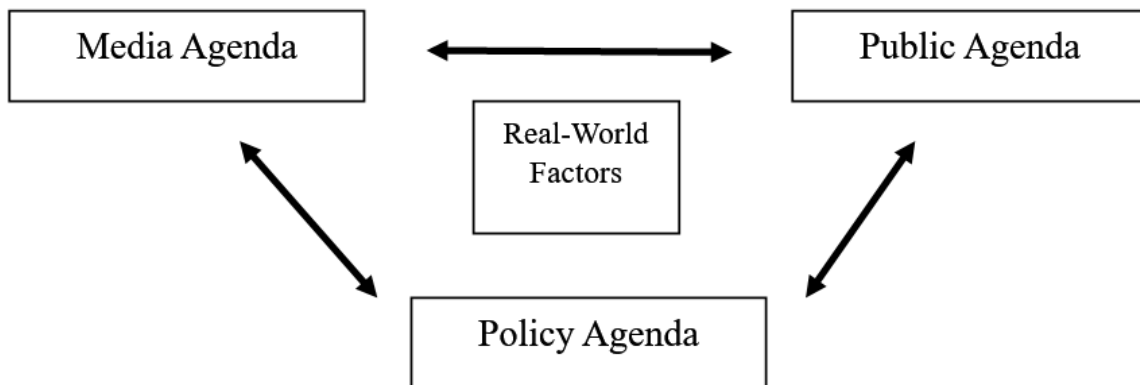


Figure 4. Model of Agenda Setting Process. Source: Soroka, S.⁷⁵

In short, agenda setting role of the media means how the media not only acts as a gateway to knowledge about any Object that we can't have a firsthand experience of (that is, *What* to think about) ⁷⁶, but also chooses which attributes set the tone for how the audience of the media envision the object in their minds (*How* to think about it). As McCombs puts it in a rather recent revision of AST in 2011, '*Influencing the focus of public attention is a powerful role, but,*

⁷⁴ In current discussions under the AST, the point about Agenda Setting Role is about which one of these three group (the public, the media, or policymakers) gets to influence and guide the other two.

⁷⁵ Soroka, "Issue Attributes and Agenda-Setting by Media, the Public, and Policymakers."

⁷⁶ The need for selectiveness in itself is not necessarily out of malicious intent or bias- all media (print, audio-visual) have limited space or time and therefore must be selective in coverage. Whether selected objects and attributes are presented with flawed logic, biases or unsubstantiated claims is a different story.

arguably, influencing the agenda of attributes for an issue or political figure is the epitome of political power (8).'⁷⁷ At the same time, the later, more recent developments in the premises of AST have taken on a rather constructivist approach and emphasize that under different circumstances and in relation to different objects, the “agenda setting” role may be assumed by any of the three sides of these negotiations, meaning the public, too, can assume an agenda setting role and force the media into paying attention to what is deemed important in the public discourse, and what attributes should be attached to it.

Since McCombs and Shaw’s seminal research confirming the role of media in setting public agenda in 1968⁷⁸, a host of studies to examine, explore and expand their theory on Agenda Setting have been carried out in different domains. However, Similar to many other works focusing on the relationship between the media and public opinion, such as Chomsky’s and Herman’s⁷⁹, Parenti’s⁸⁰, and others, still most of the agenda-setting studies are focused on overtly political content, news hour broadcasts, journalistic political segments on television⁸¹, and more specifically, on elections⁸², as well as in the context of agenda setting between mainstream media and social media⁸³. In this study, my use of agenda setting theory is mainly to extend the application of this lens that helps explore negotiations between the media and the public to the dynamics of cultural memory in the non-journalistic television content, which is not a typical subject of inquiry in Agenda Setting research. This is particularly helpful because as discussed in the literature review, there is a strong body of literature about the role of

⁷⁷ McCombs, “The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion.”

⁷⁸ McCombs and Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.”

⁷⁹ In both Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*; Chomsky, *Media Control*.

⁸⁰ Parenti, *Make-Believe Media*.

⁸¹ Example: Cottiero et al., “War of Words.”

⁸² Such as Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta, “Intermedia Agenda Setting in Television, Advertising, and Blogs During the 2004 Election”; Balmas and Sheaffer, “Candidate Image in Election Campaigns.”, and many others.

⁸³ Such as Enli, “Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider”; Lee and Xu, “The More Attacks, the More Retweets.”, and many others.

television in Russia that points to the guiding position of the state-affiliated media in relation to the public opinion and agenda, and it will be interesting to find out if the same dynamics apply to the landscape of collective cultural memory in the particular case of Soviet everyday life.

In the context of this case study, Agenda Setting theory is extended to treat the event of the emergence of the Thaw genre dramas on federal television as an act of Priming⁸⁴ of a single Object (everyday life). This means that by presenting a new genre focusing on the Thaw era and producing multiple television series about it over a decade, the media has already brought the subject of everyday life during this particular historical period to the forefront of public discourse. Following the framework, my treatment of the factors enumerated under the broad themes of nostalgia (Economic, Socio-cultural, and Identity attributes) will be as attributes of this Object. In relation to the first research question, this frame of thought allows me to navigate through the representations of the Thaw in the television series and look for specific instances where these attributes are located and showcased.

2.2 Methods

In terms of methods, the first research question seeks to analyze how the selected television drama depict everyday life during the Thaw era, examining the representations of the particular attributes relevant to the object of Soviet everyday life. This will involve narrative analysis and evaluation of the said representations on television, based on an understanding of communications as a form of social action focused on generation of meaning, which will then nest this narrative analysis in the wider scope of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an established approach and method of inquiry into audio-visual productions. As Fairclough notes

⁸⁴ Bringing a certain topic/object to the forefront repeatedly.

in his assessment of the evolving dynamics of media discourse ⁸⁵, the analysis of media discourse involves a comprehensive assessment that spans various dimensions. Given its emphasis on the interplay between language, culture and society, and its inherent contextual nature, CDA can be perceived as a multifaceted versatile approach that gives it a certain overarching quality which allows for popular methods of qualitative analysis such as content analysis, semiotics, or narrative analysis to be incorporated into its processes ⁸⁶. Consequently, CDA proves to be particularly useful when applied to the examination of audio-visual productions. Fairclough outlines diverse approaches for the study of discourse and media, recognizing the various avenues through which CDA can be employed, contingent on the specific context and subject of study. One of these approaches is Van Dijk's Social-Cognitive model, that helps bridge between textual analysis and sociocultural analysis (28-29). Van Dijk's perspective offers a distinct approach that gives much higher weight to the process of *Social Cognition* ⁸⁷. He outlines three key reasons for adopting this approach: firstly, that discourse is produced and interpreted based on '*socially shared knowledge and beliefs (110)*', secondly, that the impact of discourse on social structure is channeled through the social cognition of its participants, and thirdly, that social structures influence discourse structure through the lens of social cognition ⁸⁸. In analyzing the narrative of the film as well as thematic analysis of the reception of it, I take my cue from Van Dijk's approach. This application will involve not only recognizing and understanding representations, but also the nuances and the degrees of emphasis, and the selective incorporation or exclusion of various phenomena and meanings or messages, against the backdrop of the historical context.

⁸⁵ Fairclough, *Media Discourse*.

⁸⁶ Jensen, *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research*.

⁸⁷ Van Dijk relies on Farr's and Moscovici's definition of Social Cognition as '*the system of mental strategies and structures shared by group members, and in particular those involved in the understanding, production or representation of social objects (110)*'. See Van Dijk, "Social Cognition and Discourse."

⁸⁸ Van Dijk.

The second research question has to do with the quality of the influence these representations have on the public memory of life during the Thaw period. To explore this, I will rely on thematic analysis of reception data presented by viewers through popular film review platforms, including Kino-teatr, mail.ru, Kinopoisk, and iRecomment. By investigating how the audience perceives, interprets, and reacts to the representations offered to them by the television series, the research ultimately can evaluate the role of media in not only setting the agenda for the public, but also the degrees to which it has been able to influence the existing perceptions of life during the Thaw era within the limits of the case study.

2.3 Case Selection: Simulated vs. Narrated Past

As discussed earlier, the majority of studies exploring the portrayal of historical events or periods in contemporary Russian films and television series have focused on the narratives of WWII on TV, and there is a noticeable gap regarding the analysis of productions set in the post-WWII era, specifically the newly emerged genre of Thaw dramas, depicting a short-lived, “golden” age of life during the Soviet Union. While the WWII genre productions, closely linked to national identity, can be linked to memories and nostalgic yearnings for senses of taking pride in the victory, of belonging to a superpower, and the depiction of a culture of solidarity and sacrifice, the Thaw dramas create a different image focused more on everyday life and the broader social and human experiences on individual and small-group levels during a period marked by the emergence of free-spirited individuals in literature, music, and the arts, along with a relatively relaxed socio-political atmosphere. I believe that these aspects of the "Thaw" dramas, with their rather modern and relatable qualities, can better resonate with contemporary audiences, as supported by the social surrogacy concept and other research into contemporary film and television audience behavior, and can at the same time contribute greatly to the processes of remembering other nostalgic attributes that have to with social,

cultural and everyday economic aspects of life. By designing a case study around an example for this genre, my objective is to gain insights into the qualitative elements of these depicted image, which can be assumed to contribute to and draw from common contemporary narratives surrounding the everyday life during the Soviet past.

Within this newly emerged Thaw genre on television and out of the few TV series set in the Thaw period, I initially shortlisted the three of the most successful and significant ones produced and aired during the past decade: *The Thaw* (Оттепель) (2013), *The Mysterious Passion* (Таинственная Страсть) (2016), a television adaptation of a novel by Vasily Aksyonov⁸⁹, and *The Optimists* (Оптимисты) (2017). This shortlisting was based on a number of factors— The three series were aired on the most popular federal TV channels, Channel One (Первый канал) and Russia-1 (Россия-1), giving them potentially the maximum reach to the widest possible audiences, they all have received strong response from both the critiques in the press as well as the public on online platforms, and all three have been recognized as highly acclaimed productions in one form or another through being nominated or chosen for different achievement awards.

Among the three shortlisted TV series, however, there are certain qualities that make the *Mysterious Passion* stand out as a unique case. First of all, the novel and the series deal with a fictional account of real-life people, iconic cult figures of the 1960s, and real-life events. Consequently, the socio-cultural significance of the television adaptation of the *Mysterious Passion* is unmatched with the extensive reactions, public debates, and reviews it attracted. In comparison to the other Thaw genre productions, the *Mysterious Passion* stands out in the sense that it *simulates* life in the 1960s. It deals with a host of familiar historical events and popular characters paired with a non-linear storyline that goes back and forth between these events, and

⁸⁹ Aksyonov, *Tainstvennaya Strast' (Roman o Shestidesyatnikakh) Avtorskaya Versiya. [Mysterious Passion (a Novel about the Sixties) Author's Version.]*.

between these events and present time in the scenes where the author is interviewed by a present-time journalist, creating a mosaic of event-based blocks that have a strong potential in negotiating the collective memory of the 1960s Soviet Russia. This strong element of *familiarity* with the use of living subject, and the simulation quality, bring the viewers of the series (or the readers of the original novel) very close to the experience of being at the receiving end of “communicative” memory, and ultimately help construct a *hyperreality* that is unique to the Mysterious Passion compared to the other period dramas that explore the Thaw era.^{90 91 92}

It is this particular power over history and the hyperreality created by the narrative in the Mysterious Passion that makes it stand out significantly. These qualities make the series an ideal case for exploring how certain attributes of a bygone golden era get echoed strongly through public television while some others get dismissed, and how the public reacts to these representations.

⁹⁰ This quality can be linked closely to Jean Baudrillard’s notions of postmodern simulation and simulacra– the type of narrative that generates this hyperreality has a unique quality of blurring the boundaries between the real and the simulacrum, as what it offers is ‘*no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.*’ (See: Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.) This **simulated** past, as opposed to **narrated** past, turns the nature of the medium from a carrier of memory to a site of memory, where instead of the past being remembered, past events start to happen again.

⁹¹ This is also close to Juri Lotman’s notion of “**Secondary Reality, created by culture**” (See: Lotman, Grishakova, and Clark, *Culture and Explosion*.) For Lotman, when secondary or alternate realities are created by the media and especially, on television, they are placed in a particular position of power, which turns them into a point of reference where reality is constantly defined, altered and negotiated.

⁹² This secondary reality on TV can also be linked to with what Pierre Bourdieu defines as **symbolic power**, which is the power of “**Constructing reality**”, of “*making people see and believe*”, of “*confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action of the world and the world itself. An almost magical power*” (See: Bourdieu, Thompson, and Raymond, *Language and Symbolic Power*.) This magical, symbolic power is at its peak when dealing with a case like The Mysterious Passion, with its quality of blurring the lines between fiction and memoir, memory and history.

Chapter 3: The Mysterious Passion

The Mysterious Passion (2016) is a television series adaptation of Vasily Aksyonov's fictionalized memoirs, in which the prominent cult figures of literature and arts from the 1960s including himself, Robert Rozhdestvensky, Evgeny Yevtushenko, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Voznesensky, Bulat Okudzhava, Vladimir Vysotsky, Yuri Nagibin and others appear under fictitious names. While the focus of this dissertation is the Television adaptation of the “Mysterious Passion” and not the original novel, it will be helpful to include a few introductory paragraphs on the novel. This inclusion allows us to gain a better understanding of Aksyonov's perspective and his relationship with his literary creation.

3.1 The Novel

Aksyonov's novel “The Mysterious Passion” was published posthumously in 2009⁹³ and created a somewhat expected dispute over the accuracy of the events, personality of the characters, and their relationship with each other as described in the text. But generally, it received relatively positive reviews⁹⁴. Aksyonov himself never claimed that his novel is a true depiction of the lives of the 1960s cult figures portrayed in his work. In fact, right from the beginning and in the preface to his novel, he makes two points clear: first, that he does not feel comfortable with the genre of memoir, because matters such as accuracy of events, character development, dates, and time, overshadow the literary value of the work, and secondly, he emphasizes that the novel is an authored, fictional take on 1960s life⁹⁵. In this sense, he admits that his work revolves around memory rather than factual reporting, and he actively engages in

⁹³ Another Author's Version was published in 2015.

⁹⁴ Example of these reviews can be found on Live Lib:

<https://www.livelib.ru/book/1001481036/reviews-tainstvennaya-strast-roman-o-shestidesyatnikah-vasilij-aksenov/~4> and other similar sources.

⁹⁵ Aksyonov, *Tainstvennaya Strast' (Roman o Shestidesyatnikakh) Avtorskaya Versiya. [Mysterious Passion (a Novel about the Sixties) Author's Version.]*, 2.

mythmaking, placing his novel in the domain of cultural memory and crafted reinterpretation of a significant historical period. In this regard, it must be noted that fictionality is inherent to the memoir genre. Discussing the distinction between memoir and fiction, David Shields⁹⁶ argues that in essence, both are equally indebted to the author's memory, in the sense that a fiction writer borrows from their own memory of lived experience, and memoir writers offer their own perspective and narrative of how they have made sense of a lived past, which is fictitious by nature. '*Anything processed by memory is fictions (57)*', writes Shields, noting that '*Our memories are filled with gaps and distortions, because by its very nature, memory is selective. The genius of memory is that it is choosy, chancy, and temperamental (59)*'.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the audiences of a compelling historical novel or film tend to internalize the events as if they were hearing firsthand accounts from someone who lived in that era. This means that regardless of all these acknowledgements, historical narratives, which make an immensely popular genre across the world, offer a unique, desirable experience of filling the gaps in historical knowledge and bringing to life what is, without these narratives, a raw account of the past. From the readers' or viewers' point of view, the majority of whom are not exactly concerned with objective historical accuracy, the fictitiousness of historical narratives is not a priority issue, and the success of a historical novel or film lies in its ability to evoke powerful emotions and make the audience feel deeply connected to the characters and events portrayed. At the same time, skilled authors and filmmakers that dwell in this genre often incorporate authentic details, events, and settings into the narrative, which is the case with the *Mysterious Passion* both in the novel and the television adaptation. This blend of real historical facts with fictional elements can make it challenging for readers or viewers to distinguish between what is true and what is not, even if they do care about it. As a

⁹⁶ Shields, *Reality Hunger*.

result, the story gains credibility and authenticity, making the audience more likely to believe that it has some basis in reality.

3.2 Television adaptation

In contrast to the novel, the television series spans only from the Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 to the entry of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968. The novel and the series diverge in various aspects ⁹⁷. For example, the television adaptation, unlike the text of the novel, is devoted to a love story between the protagonist Waxon (prototyped after Aksyonov himself) and Ralissa (portrayed after Maya Karmen), his love interest throughout the series, which is not the main plot of the novel ⁹⁸. The television series also incorporates a distinctive storytelling element of embedded narrative, or frame narrative, where in almost every episode, it includes sepia-filtered scenes featuring a fictional present-day Aksyonov who is alive and has successfully published the book and is being interviewed by a reporter, discussing the people and events depicted in the novel. These present-day scenes act as a frame story, providing extra information about an imaginary Aksyonov as the author and narrator of the colored depiction of the main storyline set in the late 1950s and throughout 1960s, which unifies the otherwise nonlinear blocks of stories that are covered in the novel. These differences can be justified as necessary for the purpose of artistic expression in the cinematic medium. In a style close to hallucinatory realism, the original author creatively altered and reshaped the characters of his protagonists in the novel, and the scriptwriter and creators of the television series simply followed suit in their own way.

⁹⁷ See Kondrashov, “And the Passion for Betrayal.” For an extensive comparison between the novel and the TV adaptation.

⁹⁸ See: Karyev, “Prodyuser Denis Yevstigneyev o seriale «Tainstvennaya strast'» [Producer Denis Evstigneev on TV series ‘Mysterious Passion’].”

In terms of the narrative, although the series is only loosely based on the novel, the core features of it, including the main characters, references to historical events, non-linear storytelling, and of course, the abundant inclusion of poetry and music of the late 1950s and 1960s are shared between the two. Following the original novel's plot, the series uses pseudonyms given to the main characters by Aksyonov, which can be understood as an effort to underscore the fictitious aspect of the story. Although the list is extensive, the primary characters, their real-life counterparts, and their respective actors include:

Character in Novel	Real-life Counterpart	Actor
Waxon	Vasily Aksyonov	Alexey Morozov
Robert Er	Robert Rozhdestvensky	Alexander Ilyin Jr.
Nella Akho	Bella Akhmadulina	Chulpan Khamatova
Ian Tushinsky	Evgeny Yevtushenko	Philip Yankovsky
Anton Andreotis	Andrey Voznesensky	Evgeny Pavlov
Kukush Oktava	Bulat Okudzhava	Alexey Agopyan
Vlad Vertikalov	Vladimir Vysotsky	Sergey Bezrukov
Ralissa (Waxon's love interest)	Maya Karmen	Yulia Peresild
Yakov Protsky	Joseph Brodsky	Artur Beschastny
Mark Avrellov	Yuri Nagibin	Oleg Shtefanko
Mira Repina (Waxon's wife)	Kira Aksyonova	Yulia Khlinina
Marie Ezhenn (Waxon's love interest, and later, Vertikalov's (Vysotsky's) partner)	Marina Vladi	Sofia Zaika
Henry Izvestov	Ernst Neizvestny	Alexandr Bolshakov
Kruglov (KGB Officer)	--	Alexey Barabash
Kilkichev (Chairman of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party)	Leonid Ilyichyov	Vladimir Yumatov

Table 3 Characters, their real-life counterparts, and actors depicting them in the TV adaptation.

Paired with the retro aesthetics which set the storyline in the 1960s, there is an abundant use of original poetry and music written and performed by these iconic figures throughout the series. Most episodes open with Nella Akho (Akhmadulina), reciting three quatrains from Bella Akhmadulina's poem, 'Along this street of mine' (По улице моей) from which the title of the novel and series are borrowed. These verses also set the tone and provide a significant thematic frame for the unfolding narrative, adding depth and resonance to the plot and character developments.

Original	Translation by E. Feinstein & A. Anichkin
По улице моей который год звучат шаги — мои друзья уходят. Друзей моих медлительный уход той темноте за окнами угоден.	For how many years along this street of mine have I overheard those footsteps - of my friends leaving. And the darkness outside my window draws pleasure, in witnessing every sluggish departure.
Запущены моих друзей дела, нет в их домах ни музыки, ни пенья, и лишь, как прежде, девочки Дега голубенькие оправляют перья.	My friends do not look after their affairs, nor music, neither songs are present in their homes, there's just a flock of usual Degas' girls, with light-blue feathers, checking hues.
Ну что ж, ну что ж, да не разбудит страх вас, беззащитных, среди этой ночи. К предательству таинственная страсть , друзья мои, туманит ваши очи.	What can I do, what can I do, don't let your fears wake up you, helpless, in the night. That passion for betrayal, so mysterious, my friends, it's clouding your sight.

Other episodes feature different protagonists reciting well-known instances of poetry or music. These flashbacks to the poetry and music of the 1960s and showcasing the expressive traditions of the early Thaw period accompanied by significant social and personal undertones that help set the story in the era, also serve as nostalgic catalysts.

Throughout its twists and turns, the Mysterious Passion weaves through the lives of a group of exceptionally sharp and talented individuals who achieved great success at a young age, enjoying fame, fortune, and various luxuries, reinventing art, poetry, and the language of their era. As they progress in life, however, they will have to confront the realities of existence. As the plot unfolds, the show touches upon themes of shifting relationships, the complexities of human emotions, and the aftermath of life-altering choices, paired with depictions of real-life events which start with the festival of Youth and Students in 1957, and ends with the entry of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968, leading the protagonists toward diverse outlooks on life leaving them with varying degrees of optimism and pessimism. All this ultimately is an effort to capture the essence of the series' title and Bella Akhmadulina's verses about fading friendships, betrayal, and the ensuing cold level-headed silence, marking the end of the Thaw era.

3.3 Narrative Analysis of the Representations

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the main attributes of nostalgia for the life during the Soviet period based on the available literature can be divided into three broad themes of Economic, Socio-Cultural, and Identity factors. As a production that deals with the subject of everyday life during the Thaw, the *Mysterious Passion* can mainly be viewed through the lens of representations pertaining to social, cultural, and economic attributes of remembering life during this bygone era, and references to external politics, Great Power status and alike are minimal and only in passing. The below passages, therefore, are concerned with the dominant representations in the sphere of domestic affairs, economy, society and culture.

3.3.1 Economic Attributes

Overall Material Prosperity

The series begins by easing in the viewers into the gradual socio-economic and cultural changes that characterize the Thaw period; one of Waxon's stories gets accepted by *Yunost* journal, allowing him to move to Moscow and secure a contract and paycheck. All the allure of the outside world, foreign clothes and jazz music have begun to get into the country, and rehabilitated former prisoners are shown living ordinary lives. The first time that the protagonists are pictured together is where they are sifting through a pile of foreign-made clothes, presumably smuggled into the country, with upbeat music playing in the background. The hopeful and joyous atmosphere of the capital is portrayed in the Festival of Youth and Students of 1957 happening in the meantime. In the second episode, having just published a couple of stories in the *Yunost*, Waxon is recommended for membership in the Writers Union, which allows him to dine with his friends at the Central House of Writers, and as it is explained to him, gives him the right to “regular rations, buying a car, resting at the sanatoriums belonging

to the Lit-fund,” and best of all, travel to Koktebel, which happens shortly after. At least for its first few episodes, the series showcases its protagonists with an aura of hope and confidence in a better future awaiting them.

An Urban-centric Narrative

Apart from the overall tone of the series, which depicts the protagonists living a relatively comfortable life, all with roofs over their heads, without major financial difficulties, engaging in celebratory activities such as dining out and drinking, dancing, and vacationing in Crimea, and all that on poets’ and writers’ salaries, *Mysterious Passion* has a strong urban-centric focus. The limited sets and exclusive emphasis on urban settings almost completely lack any representation of the working class and ordinary citizens, except for very short moments mainly at the beginning of some episodes (episodes 3, 5 and 7 for instance) where the protagonists are reciting poetry or playing music at factories, construction sites, labs, and so on, and a handful of workers are present listening to them. In almost all other scenes where the protagonists are depicted in outdoor sets, the appearance of the urban passersby is adorned with beautiful tailor-made clothes and stylish hairdo, glamorizing the urban life of the era. It is striking how the portrayal of well-dressed protagonists and passersby in the series omits the lifestyle and appearance of the majority of the actual people of Moscow (or anywhere in the USSR or many other countries at the time), offering a skewed representation of the city's population. As journalist Anastasia Mironova of the *Gazeta.ru* writes on the television genre of retro films, ‘*Year after year, the USSR on television is becoming more beautiful. Everyday the uneasy parts are gradually forced out of the frame and replaced by small touches, which overall create the illusion of a Soviet well-being*’⁹⁹. Mironova notes that with all the posh settings, crystal champaign glasses, grapes and cheese on the side, and designer clothes worn by everyone from

⁹⁹ Mironova, “KGB in champagne splashes.”

a KGB officer to a writer or a private investigator's mistress, all set in beautiful and tidy apartments whether communal or private, *'it is in this cleanliness, tidiness, airiness that the main propaganda force of the film lies - it romanticizes the Soviets.'* While this process of romanticization, achieved through subtle aesthetic alterations, can be viewed as a calculated and politically motivated intervention in the collective memory of the Thaw, as exemplified by Mironova's views, it can also be interpreted as a response to prevailing sentiments and audience aspirations. Mironova's viewpoint aligns with Dubin's argument that Soviet history is reduced to a handful of episodes showcased on television for political purposes. However, this perspective can't serve as the sole explanation. Existing literature on the broader human condition, which explores the global inclination towards nostalgia as a form of refuge ¹⁰⁰, confirms that even without direct political manipulation, a demand for such themes exists. Therefore, the filmmakers' approach in this instance, if seen as a response to the popular demand, might be interpreted as extra effort in further enhancing and beautifying an already idealized, imaginary, fictional and non-existing past.

A good example of this fictional wardrobe choice of the creators of the Mysterious Passion series is in the 3rd episode which covers the first fashion show in the USSR during the peak of the Thaw era, with Dior coming to Moscow after the ban on fashion shows was lifted in 1959. See figures below:

¹⁰⁰ For instance, Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Bauman, *Retrotopia*; Sielke, "Retro Aesthetics, Affect, and Nostalgia Effects in Recent US-American Cinema."



Figure 2. Style of Moscovites as depicted in the film.

Figures 5 to 6 show actual pictures of Dior models photographed in Moscow in 1959, with citizens of Moscow in the background ¹⁰¹.



Figure 3. by Howard Sochurek for LIFE Magazine /Getty Images

¹⁰¹ My use of Sochurek's pictures here is only for visual comparison. There is no question that any photographer can have specific agendas when deciding what to include or exclude in their images.



Figure 4. by Howard Sochurek for LIFE Magazine /Getty Images



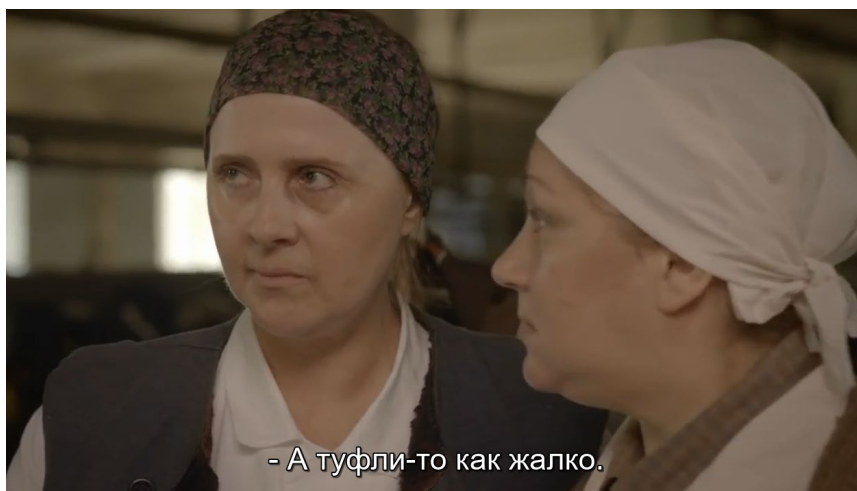
Figure 5. by Howard Sochurek for LIFE Magazine /Getty Images

There are, as mentioned, minor exceptions to this otherwise constant urban and glamorized theme. In the opening scenes of episode 9, for example, a fleeting glance into non-

urban life is offered to the audience, where Nella (Akhmadulina) stands before a group of farmers, reciting poetry. Their demeanor suggests a limited grasp of urban high culture that is fully embraced by the creators of the series, and within their momentary presence, they are characterized by an air of obliviousness, pettiness, and envy. This brief yet noteworthy moment within the narrative may be considered one of the most distinctively elitist portrayals offered by the series. It is also interesting, however, that even the farmworker ladies wear ironed spotless clothes:



Figure 6. Nella Akho (Bella Akhmadulina) reciting her 1968 poem, *Заклинание (Incantation)*, to a group of farmers. Ep.9



- А туфли-то как жалко.

Figure 7. The reaction of her audience- gossiping about her clothing.

The reason for pointing out this urban-centric, somewhat elitist, and glamorous image presented by the series is not to criticize factual discrepancies, of which there are many instances in the storyline, but rather to highlight its overall potential in reinforcing the idea of collective prosperity and a decent life for all, which is, as discussed earlier, a strong theme fueling nostalgic feelings toward life in the Soviet era. As Susan Sontag noted decades ago and Roland Barthes had observed even earlier than that, a picture is not only about what appears within its frame, but also about what is left out of it ¹⁰². Filtering and altering the human experience of ordinary people present in figures 3 to 5 with their unadorned faces and attire and showcasing scenes such as figure 2 in its place, which is claimed to depict the exact same time and event, is an act of exclusion that masks small, but important pieces of information. Taken together with the comfortable lives of the protagonists, this exclusion can directly contribute to the notion that the era was characterized by collective prosperity and contentment, and reinforce the nostalgic sentiments for an imaginary past when all people enjoyed a relatively comfortable economic status. This visual contrast, which skews toward a more affluent representation, is a good example of how media choices can influence and alter the collective memory of a historical period.

3.3.2 Socio-cultural Attributes

The opening of the series, which depicts the early years of Thaw, is not only about relative material prosperity, but also showcases the hopeful and joyous atmosphere of the late 1950s with a focus on rather personal, emotional experiences. This focus on the human and societal dimensions of the Thaw is visible not only in the broader depictions of the hopeful vibe of society, but also in multiple instances of incorporating small yet memorable real-life events

¹⁰² Sontag, *On Photography*; Barthes, *Mythologies*; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

into the storyline that symbolize the Thaw in public memory, giving the storyline a further sense of familiarity. For example, toward the end of the first episode of the series, Robert Er (Rozhdestvensky) is shown reciting poetry under Mayakovsky's monument in Moscow ¹⁰³ which evokes recollection of a significant symbol of the early Thaw optimism ¹⁰⁴.

Friendship

But returning to the specific attributes of nostalgia discussed in the introductory chapter, examining the portrayal of societal factors in the series reveals a complex picture. On the surface, the main storyline vividly depicts very close bonds between the protagonists. The group of friends share everything in their lives, extend help when needed, and confide even their deepest secrets in each other. While family dynamics between the group of friends are not extensively depicted, instances of discord, infidelity, and other complexities are juxtaposed with the unwavering support the group of friends offers to one another during moments of distress. Regardless of individual challenges, the camaraderie among the characters remains a constant, hinting at an inseparable bond forged among the heroes, and friendships endure even among those whose marriages have dissolved. These are all in line with the nostalgic attributes of stronger social ties, sense of trust, and enduring friendships between people.

¹⁰³ Interestingly, in the television series “the Thaw” (2013) and towards the end of its first episode, there is also a moment showing Robert Rozhdestvensky reciting poetry at the same location.

¹⁰⁴ During the summer of 1958, a monument honoring Mayakovsky was unveiled in Moscow, and the official unveiling ceremony saw Soviet poets reciting their works. However, the event took an unexpected turn when, at the ceremony's conclusion, members of the public began to go off-script and the attendees decided to meet at the monument regularly. Initially, the authorities didn't perceive this as a significant threat. In fact, a Moscow newspaper even published an article detailing these gatherings, specifying the time and extending an open invitation to poetry enthusiasts. As a result, people started gathering in the evenings, with mostly students who recited poems by poets who had been forgotten or suppressed, and participants shared their own compositions, occasionally engaging in discussions on art and literature. As observed by some authors, the introduction of poetry into the public urban space through these readings acted as both a stimulant for creative expression and a catalyst for the authorities' crackdown, which ultimately happened in 1961. See: Bukovsky, *Mayakovsky Square 1958-1965*; Osokina, “Poetic readings at the monument to Vladimir Mayakovsky.”

Women

Beneath this beautiful façade of friendship and support, however, it is worth noting how the female protagonists of the series are primarily depicted as beautiful objects of desire, carrying the burden of romanticization of the era through retro aesthetics, fashion choices, and submissive characters. It is true that in many similar works, female characters carry aesthetic values to help filmmakers preserve and showcase the visual aspects of an era. For these female protagonists, however, their value as citizens, poets, authors, editors and so on is completely secondary to their ideal role of making the film attractive and visually appealing to the contemporary audience. Even in the case of Bella Akhmadulina, the series appears to have limitations that don't fully capture her multi-dimensional persona. Despite her significant contributions as a renowned poet and her bold, rebellious lifestyle, the series reduces her character to primarily being depicted as a beautiful, fashionable, and at times, neurotic woman, who is also intermittently the object of desire for multiple male characters of the series. The lack of any effort to acknowledge her impact on the storyline of the series, the novel, and even Aksyonov himself in real life, and appropriating her character to be more pleasing for the contemporary audience, are not easy to overlook.

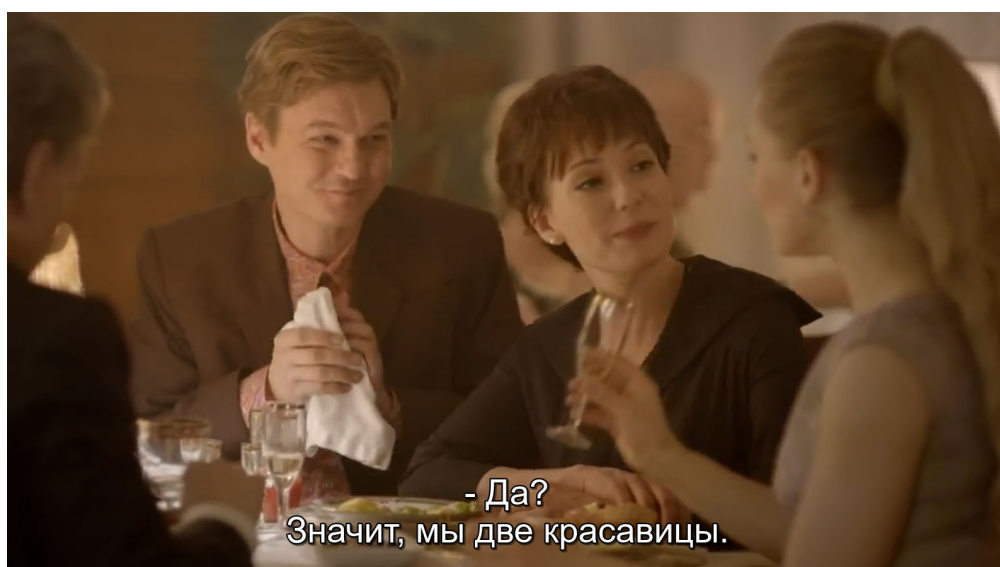


Figure 8. Nella Akho (Bella Akhmadulina) meeting Ralissa for the first time. Ep. 2, 6:30

Another example is Ralissa, Waxon's love interest, whose love affair becomes a somewhat central theme to the series. In comparison to her real-life counterpart, Maya Karmen, who was not only a socialite belonging to the Soviet elite class but also a worldly sophisticated woman, Ralissa's portrayal drastically falls short. The series depicts Ralissa as an obedient provincial girl with no remarkable talent or flair, other than her physical attractiveness, who in marrying director and cameraman Semyon Kochevoi many years her senior (portrayed after film director Roman Karmen), exchanges all she has to offer, namely her youth and beauty, for her sick mother to be taken to a central hospital in Moscow. Similarly, Mirra Repina, based on Kira Aksyonova, is portrayed merely as a young impressionable beautiful girl who is also depicted in a passive, jealous, and at times hysterical manner, reduced to being just another conquest in Waxon's philanderous lifestyle. In all of its over 10 hours of serialized film, the *Mysterious Passion*, just like many other films including some of the highest-grossing ones in the world ¹⁰⁵, is a complete failure when put to the Bechdel-Wallace test, which is a very basic litmus test designed to assess representations of women in different forms of narrative, including the male-dominated film industry ¹⁰⁶.

With these ornamental representations in mind, it is possible to revisit the concept of presentist appropriations and contemplate the underlying conversation between the demands of the audience and the works produced by filmmakers. The way historical female figures are portrayed in the series raises questions about how contemporary values and societal preferences influence these televised representations. The portrayal of women in the series, where their

¹⁰⁵ Appel and Gnambs, "Women in Fiction: Bechdel-Wallace Test Results for the Highest-Grossing Movies of the Last Four Decades."

¹⁰⁶ Bechdel-Wallace test requires a narrative to "include two or more *named* women" who "have a conversation with *each other*" about "something *other* than a man". It is not a quality test and does not say if a film is a feminist film or if it is a good film. In an industry where women have been predominantly depicted by male directors for a male audience, the Bechdel-Wallace test is a simple evaluation tool for understanding if at all female presence has been a concern for the filmmakers.

characters are simplified and reduced to certain roles and aesthetics, may very well reflect present norms and values that resonate with contemporary audience expectations. At the same time, recognizing the agenda-setting power of media producers and the earlier discussion on the cosmetic enhancement of an already fictionalized, non-existing past, it should be highlighted that as a significant memory project spotlighting a past golden era, created for broadcast on a leading national television channel, these narrative qualities of the series also appear to contain traces of the official discourse in Russia, which revolves around concepts and decrees on so-called traditional family values, gender-specific norms and roles, and preservation or revival of family institution in light of demographic concerns.

This tendency to reinforce stereotypical representation of women is by no means exclusive solely to this specific television program or to Russia. But as Holly Porteus points out, when considering the broader public discourse, not just within contemporary Russia but also drawing from various studies that underscore the significance of beauty and femininity for women during the Soviet era, this phenomenon assumes a more intensified form, burdening Russian women with a rather extreme case of objectification. In a nutshell, Porteus notes, *'[Gendered] Beauty Labor is, and has long been, one of the most important elements of a discourse of normative femininity in Russian culture and society (413)'*¹⁰⁷. In the context of the present case and in either side of these exchanges—whether the series is considered as echoing prevailing patriarchal norms within the society, or presenting the preferences of producers and those in position of power—it is worth noting that among the 2662 reviews collected for the next section on reception analysis, not a single review has raised concerns about this matter. This silence tips the scale in favor of prevalent patriarchy, suggesting that contemporary dominant societal norms and values may not lend themselves to questioning these aspects in either side of production and reception of these representations, and that the

¹⁰⁷ Porteous, ““A Woman Isn’t a Woman When She’s Not Concerned About the Way She Looks.””

past is getting appropriated into backing the present norms and values not because it is a decision *from the top*, but because it is a reality within society itself.

Family life

Another theme among the previously discussed attributes of nostalgia which is worth discussing in relation to the series pertains to the concept of stronger and more intimate family bonds. While family dynamics do not serve as the central focus, the series does explore different household arrangements through Waxon's life journey, which in turn spotlight the diverse cohabitation styles customary during this era. In the first episode, Waxon finds himself stationed in the provinces as a medical doctor, living in a communal apartment shared with various working-class residents. This household is characterized by clutter, numerous occupants, scarce amenities, and a complete absence of luxury (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The earlier communal apartment



Figure 9. Repin's apartment in Moscow

Moving to Moscow, however, other modern household arrangements emerge. In Moscow Waxon moves in with the Repin family (figures 9), a nuclear unit embodying all classic familial roles—parents and two children, a boy and a girl, and even a housemaid. They inhabit a rather lavish apartment, likely due to Repin's role as a top physicist on a secret government project, and they are ready to extend the household when Waxon marries their daughter. This portrayal embodies the post-Stalinist pronatalist urban nuclear family among the higher echelons of society ¹⁰⁸, which resonates much better with the contemporary audiences. There is, however, one rather major omission here in the narrative— The character of the mother of the family is introduced as a rehabilitated prisoner who has recently been released from the camps. However, the series does not depict her facing any alienation, discomfort or obstacles in reintegrating into society, nor does it address the stigma that was often associated with rehabilitated prisoners during that period. Anatoly Khazaonv attributes this omission in contemporary films to a

¹⁰⁸ For an extensive look into the family regulations and policies during the first half of the Soviet period and the drastic changes from the early Bolshevik views down to 1936 abortion ban and the return to nuclear style of family, see Kaminsky, “Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union.”

general disinterest in the Russian society to deal with the memory of repressions and victims of the Great Terror, because that would entail acknowledgement of collective guilt and collective responsibility, something similar to what happened in Germany for example, which has no place in Russian public discourse where the majority '*consider themselves not accomplices but innocent victims,...* [because] *Victimization creates a sense of unity among the nation (302)*' ¹⁰⁹.

The Culture of Sacrifice and Generational Gaps

The Repin household is also where another element discussed in nostalgic attributes, the culture of sacrifice for the collective good, gets to be showcased, although with a strong undercurrent of generational dependency, when Repin, the accomplished scientist and household head, postpones medical treatment for his chronic illness to instead complete some critical work on the Space project, exemplifying selflessness for a greater cause. Repin's portrayal is very close to what Karen Petrone calls a modern masculine archetype of Soldier-Hero—an idealized form of masculinity which is characterized by self-control and readiness for sacrificing himself for a greater cause ¹¹⁰. '*To be a soldier-hero is to be willing to fight and die for one's nation (173)*', she notes. While this archetype is essentially shared between Imperial and Soviet Russia, it fully bloomed in the image of the new Soviet man, characterized by, according to Gilmour and Clements, '*Self-control, hard work, submission to superiors, and patriotism (221)*' ¹¹¹. In this sense, the act of being a soldier-hero, or a classic ideal example of masculinity, is not limited to the battlefield, but covers any situation that involves selflessness and sacrifice for the motherland in the face of the enemy.

¹⁰⁹ Khazanov, "Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)Constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia."

¹¹⁰ Petrone, "Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures."

¹¹¹ Gilmour and Clements, "The Contradictions of Soviet Masculinity."

These traits are absent in the case of the younger protagonists of the series. The younger protagonists of the series exhibit individualistic lives driven by personal aspirations. They place greater value on friendships over formal family connections, they build marriages and romantic relationships founded on ephemeral emotions that can easily dissolve, and constantly grapple with aligning themselves with not just the state, but also the older “war generation”, represented by the likes of Repin, his wife, and Larissa’s aging husband. This contrast in norms and values becomes particularly pronounced in Waxon's response to Repin's postponement of medical treatment to instead achieve the national goal of completing the space project, which Waxon finds irrational and nonsensical, and is also visible where both Waxon and Ralissa are reminded that given the status of Ralissa’s husband who also belongs to the same *war generation*, it will be impossible for him to let go of Ralissa and agree to a divorce. The matter, of course, comes to an end when Ralissa leaves her husband after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Through showcasing these diverse intergenerational gaps, the series manages not only to define the youth of the Thaw period as a separate and pioneering generation compared to the earlier Soviet society, but also gets to cater to a diverse audience demographic, ranging from older generations who might resonate with traditional values in their recollections of the Soviet era to younger generations who seek relatable characters and themes. This is somewhat similar to the situation observed by Johannes von Moltke in the case of the post-2000s German cinema. He notes that as first-hand witnesses of the atrocities in Nazi Germany disappeared and cultural memory was handed over to films and television, the politics of representations made a swift shift toward generating empathy among the younger generations, and toward an emotional turn that engages and resonates with the contemporary audience ¹¹². For *Mysterious Passion*, a similar approach is traceable, which could be interpreted as a similar strategic decision that

¹¹² von Moltke, “Sympathy for the Devil: Cinema, History, and the Politics of Emotion.”

helps navigate potential controversy or opposition, while at the same time it allows the series to capture the complexities of a society in transition during the Thaw period.

3.3.3 Other Significant Themes

The State Apparatus

To capture the political dynamics of the Thaw period, the broader apparatus of the state and the party politics influencing the governance of the USSR throughout this era are depicted as a battleground for two contrasting forces: the reformist liberals on the one hand, and their counterforce, the conservative neo-Stalinists on the other. For the first half of the series and before his dismissal, Nikita Khrushchev as the head of the State stands at the heart of this political tug-of-war, positioned in a delicate equilibrium between these opposing factions.

Among all the characters in *Mysterious Passion*, KGB Officer Kruglov is the only representative of the security side of the state apparatus that is present throughout the series. Initially introduced as someone investigating Waxon's relations with the visiting French singer Marie Ezhen, Kruglov's role evolves as the series progresses. He later attempts to recruit Waxon as an informer on his father-in-law, Repin, claiming to be concerned with Repin's health and wellbeing. As the story unfolds, the relationship between Waxon and Kruglov experiences various ups and downs, but despite being on opposite sides, Kruglov is depicted as a well-intentioned man of culture with relatively liberal standings who appreciates Waxon's talents and writing. At times, he genuinely expresses concern for Waxon and his family, and even warns Waxon when he is being implicated for an interview with a Prague-based journal, or advises him against attending Khrushchev's meeting with members of writer's union in 1963, where later on Waxon gets accused of turning his back on the ideals of communism by Khrushchev himself, and even informs him that there is an informer among his circle of friends.

This portrayal of a caring and compassionate side to the representative of one of the most powerful and notorious intelligence organizations can be seen as an attempt to add nuances to the perceived power dynamics in the USSR, especially during the Thaw period, as the depiction of Kruglov blurs the simplistic binary between the people and the state. Despite representing the state's intelligence wing as a KGB officer, he is also portrayed as an individual with personal aspirations, like admitting that he once wanted to become a writer himself, which humanizes him, making him more than just a faceless representative of authority.

This romantic portrayal of security officers and particularly KGB personnel, is not exclusive to the *Mysterious Passion*. As Stephen Norris has shown in his study of the Spy genre films and series in a number of late Soviet and post-Soviet productions ¹¹³, depicting KGB spies as '*Russian patriots who played exciting and heroic games*' and '*men who embodied societal ideas about masculinity that included sobriety, kultur'nost', and patriotism (169)*' has been a recurring theme in this rather popular genre. In many of these storylines, he notes, it is thanks to these selfless, soberminded spies that there is '*a happy paradise where young Muscovites can flirt, talk, walk and consume (170)*'. Norris's interpretation of the genre is, however, that all these depictions come together to build a discursive rally behind a Putin-like person as the savior of Russia, which is beyond the premises of the present study.

Contrasting with the somewhat liberal character of Kruglov, midway through the series (ep.6), the character Kilkichev (based on Leonid Illichyov, Chairman of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party) is introduced, embodying the conservative, neo-Stalinist faction within the party. As the narrative unfolds, Kilkichev's role gains prominence, particularly in his portrayal as the mastermind behind the 1962-1963 purge targeting the intelligentsia, and after Khrushchev's removal from leadership. Stuck in between

¹¹³ Norris, "A Kiss for the KGB: Putin as Cinematic Hero."

these two conflicting forces stands the head of the State Nikita Khrushchev, who in the end came to be remembered as both the architect and the undoer of the Thaw, as captured brilliantly in the memorial tombstone built by Ernst Neizvestny for him at Novodevichy cemetery, sculpting his bust in between two separate blocks of white marble and black granite.

While earlier in the series, Khrushchev is only occasionally present, mostly through fleeting glimpses, such as delivering a speech on a muted television in the background or during the news coverage of Vostok 1 launch. But in episode 7 of the series, which covers the beginning of the crackdown on the liberal intelligentsia pushed for by Kilkichev who labels them the 5th column of the West, Khrushchev is present in person. The coverage of this neo-Stalinist reversal starts with depicting the art exhibition of December 1962 at Moscow's Manezh where Khrushchev attacks avant-garde artists, including Ernst Neizvestny (pseudonym- Henry Izvestov), followed by the meeting between Khrushchev and the creative intelligentsia in March 1963, where character Robert Er (Rozhdestvensky) faces a furious Khrushchev demanding from him to re-align himself with the established ideology, and Waxon and Andreotis (Voznesensky) get called to the podium to respond to allegations brought against them. This turning point in Episode 7 divides the series into two parts, with Khrushchev's pronounced actions marking the start of the reversal of the Thaw and de-Stalinization efforts. From this point on, the promising sense of artistic freedom depicted in the earlier episodes which had just begun to flourish is threatened by suppression.

In the final moments of the series, a few scenes take place in a KGB building. Waxon, disillusioned with the Soviet style of Socialism, and Tushensky (Yevtushenko), having just written his poem "Tanks are moving through Prague" (Танки идут по Праге) and sent a telegram to Brezhnev in protest of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, are shown being interviewed. Waxon is given the choice to leave the USSR for good, while Tushensky is lauded for his creative endeavors and offered a state-sponsored trip to the United States. This

divergence in the paths of the two friends, orchestrated by the center of power, brings back the story to the essence of Bella Akhmadulina's poem, from which the series derives its title, and to her earlier remarks on how the state rules over intelligentsia by dividing them and setting them up against each other. A few seconds later, Waxon realizes that his friendly KGB handler, Kruglov, is dead, signifying the demise of the optimism and openness of the Thaw era that the characters had once embraced. The interactions between Waxon, Tushensky, and the intelligence officers, paired with Kruglov's death, point to a return to a world divided between collaborators and traitors.

Geo-cultural Heritage and Crimea

Several studies have explored the influence of the Russian State's policies on media representations following the post-Euromaidan events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. However, these studies have predominantly centered on news outlets, talk shows, and overtly political programming targeted at the general public through television and other media platforms. These works often highlight how different forms of media have been instrumental in fostering national cohesion and garnering support for the Kremlin's stance on the Crimean issue, a phenomenon frequently referred to as a "rallying around the flag" moment ¹¹⁴.

While these discussions provide valuable insights into the role of news media in shaping public perception, there has been a noticeable gap in examining the portrayal of Crimea in the realm of entertainment, infotainment, and other non-journalistic programs on Russian television. Although the television series *Mysterious Passion* was aired two years after the annexation of Crimea, the publication of the novel itself predates this geopolitical event. In fact, references to Crimea as an idyllic earthly paradise and a sought-after leisure destination

¹¹⁴ Greene and Robertson, "Affect and Autocracy"; Cottiero et al., "War of Words."

for mainland Russians have for long been visible in numerous novels and literary works, even predating the Soviet era. For the Soviet intelligentsia such as Aksyonov and other figures who are also portrayed in the *Mysterious Passion*, Crimea, especially Koktebel, served as a mythical sanctuary for artists and intellectuals, offering an escape from the constraints of the authoritarian environment prevalent in the center, the spill-over from which is present throughout the television series, too ¹¹⁵ ¹¹⁶ ¹¹⁷. Throughout the series, the characters make multiple journeys to Koktebel, viewing it as the ultimate sanctuary away from their worldly troubles. Koktebel is their refuge when some of them are expelled from the writers' union, when Waxon is struggling with alcohol, and even towards the end and during moments of despair when prospects for political reform appear grim. In the final moments of the Thaw journey, it's in Koktebel that the protagonists receive the news of the USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia. Across these instances, Koktebel symbolizes a place of self-discovery and solace for the protagonists.

In this light, the portrayal of Crimea in *Mysterious Passion* can be seen as a continuation of a longstanding literary and cultural tradition that elevates Crimea as a space for artistic liberation and personal rejuvenation. The depiction of Crimea in the series can be viewed as not only a form of reinforcement of this existing cultural perspective, but also as an effort in pinpointing Crimea as an inseparable and cherished part of the Russian identity. This narrative, subtly reaffirming Crimea's significance in Russian literary and intellectual tradition, also

¹¹⁵ For a comprehensive discussion on the evolution of the image of the Crimea in Russian literature, see: Mashchenko, "Krymskoye izmereniye russkoy literatury: ot Pushkina do Prilepina [Crimean dimension of Russian literature: from Pushkin to Prilepin]"

¹¹⁶ Aksyonov's 1979 allohistorical, somewhat anti-Soviet novel "Crimea Island" (Остров Крым) is another example of his recurring return to a symbolic and mythical Crimea in his works.

¹¹⁷ On television, similar references can be observed in the TV series "Thaw (Ottepel)," which aired in 2013 on Perviy Kanal and can be considered as the pioneering show in the post-2000s Thaw genre on TV. These references serve to highlight the significance of Crimea as a cultural and historical setting within the broader context of contemporary narratives of the Soviet past in both literature and television.

happens to be consistent with the Kremlin's policy of fostering a collective recollection that emphasizes the enduring bond between Crimea and Russia as its eternal homeland.

A Focus on Domestic Affairs

In contrast to World War II films, where references to Great Power Status are often well-pronounced and revolve around themes of unity, sacrifice, military power, and victory, the portrayal of Great Power Status in the 1960s, as depicted in the *Mysterious Passion*, takes on a different nature. The series, just like many other productions in this genre, does not focus on showcasing the USSR as a global leader during the Thaw, and with only a few exceptions and in passing, there aren't even any notable references to the Great Patriotic War; however, at least in its efforts to align the narrative with the timeline, it does include significant historical moments that also reflect the country's international standing during that era. For example, the series incorporates memorable events such as the launch of the first Soviet spacecraft, which becomes a moment of celebration for the characters Waxon and the Repin family. Additionally, it touches upon the Cuban Missile Crisis, a critical moment in the Cold War that had profound implications for the USSR's international relations. The Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet response which serve as the concluding part of the series are also noted, which taken together with references to the Hungarian uprising of 1956, can highlight the USSR's role in shaping Eastern European politics during the Thaw period.

Amid these rather minor references to the USSR's global impact, *Mysterious Passion* doesn't primarily focus on the country's international presence. Instead, its main goal is to reflect on the Thaw from a domestic, insider view, that is encapsulated in a conversation about the meaning of the Thaw in a conversation between the old Aksyonov and the young reporter during Episode 7:

Aksyonov: This is how our Thaw ended.

Reporter: Is Thaw a symbol of freedom for you?

Aksyonov: The Thaw was more than freedom. The Thaw was love.

Reporter: Love? For whom?

Aksyonov: For everything. For each other, for a life that was full of hope and sunshine, even at night. Can you imagine?

During this exchange, Aksyonov's response takes on a personal and emotional angle. This portrayal underscores that the story's intention to get into the human and emotional dimensions of the Thaw era, which it aims to achieve through exploring the highs and lows of the lives of its protagonists.

3.4 Reception

As previously discussed in relation to the second research question, the evolution and configuration of collective memory occur through ongoing negotiations between multiple stakeholders, inclusive of those between media's cultural representations and the public's own recollections, which in itself is, at any given time, the result of a similar process of negotiation and contestation relying on multiple sources of communicative or cultural memory. Therefore, to find the true place of a major project such as the Mysterious Passion in the broader landscape of remembering the past, this study will be incomplete without considering the audience's reactions to the series and its depiction of a significant historical period. Consequently, the following thematic analysis of available reception data is exclusively directed at capturing how the audience responds to the portrayal of the Thaw era and its associated historical figures within the television series and does not encompass broader public discussions or responses. The purpose of utilizing reception data is to gain insight into how the interpretive output concerning a specific era and characters on television aligns with the wider context of public memory regarding the Thaw. This will also help assess the effectiveness of these representations in stimulating and shaping public discourse on the topic.

For this purpose, a dataset comprising 2662 reviews and comments from four film review platforms – Kino-teatr, kino.mail.ru, Kinopoisk, and iRecomment – was collected. The data was then filtered to exclude reviews and comments that did not directly engage with the themes of remembering the Thaw or the portrayals of the historical figures under scrutiny. As a result, a refined set of 155 reviews was identified and selected for further reception analysis. Within this analysis, each of the selected reviews was categorized with a sentiment tag based on its general attitude towards the series, classifying it as Positive, Neutral, or Negative. Subsequently, a second level of examination was conducted to pinpoint the predominant points of critique or praise attributed to the series. This approach enables the creation of a simple yet

informative overview of how the general public has responded to the television series in terms of its portrayal of the historical era and prominent figures, and the main underlying reasons for their particular responses.

It should be noted that unlike the other sources, Kino-teatr, due to its nature as a live forum, contains numerous comments that do not pertain to the subject of this study. Consequently, a rigorous selection process was employed to extract only the pertinent comments, which constitute approximately 10% of the total posted comments. This selection spans from May 2015, over a year prior to the series' broadcast, to June 2023. Notably, discussions on Kino-teatr that diverge from the theme of this study encompass a range of topics such as the quality of acting, reminiscences from various parts of the Soviet era, personal memories related to the protagonists, their poetry, and songs, which could indicate the series' efficacy in triggering nostalgic recollections, but do not help with answering directly the question of audience's attitude toward the series itself. Among these, some commentators expressed interest in reading the original book, or other works by Aksyonov, while many engaged in casual conversations about their preferences or aversions toward the author, actors (both in this and other similar films in the genre), the aesthetics of the show, or their disapproval of unfamiliar pseudonyms assigned to historical figures. Criticisms also extended to the chronological disorderliness of the film. Some predominantly younger users sought verification of the film's details, while others drew comparisons between the show and similar productions, notably "The Thaw" (2013), sparking extensive discussions. Additionally, vibrant debates emerged about other authors, poets, and even filmmakers from across the Soviet period, contributing to a diverse array of topics branching away from the Mysterious Passion. Consequently, comments directly addressing the film's representations of the 1960s or portrayal of characters are relatively sparse. For the end result of this selection process, see Table 2.

Source	Score	No. of votes	Comments / Reviews, Total	Comments / Reviews, Sampled (as Relevant)
Kino-teatr	6.3 /10	415	2607	117
Kino.mail.ru	7.5 /10	669	20	17
Kinopoisk	7.2 /10	6055	20	7
iRecommend	2.7 /5	15	15	14
Total:			2662	155

Table 4 Sample sources, review scores, total comments and the number of selected reviews.

It should also be noted that the average review scores provided in the above table represent a mean value, and review websites typically do not present scores in terms of median or mode, limiting the insight into the nuances of reception quality. This is another reason why a comprehensive analysis of comments and reviews is required to gain a better understanding of the audience’s reaction to the film.

3.4.1 Polarity of Sentiments

Sentiment analysis of the selected 155 reviews indicate polarization of opinions which aligns with a tendency toward extreme viewpoints. See figures 9 and 10.

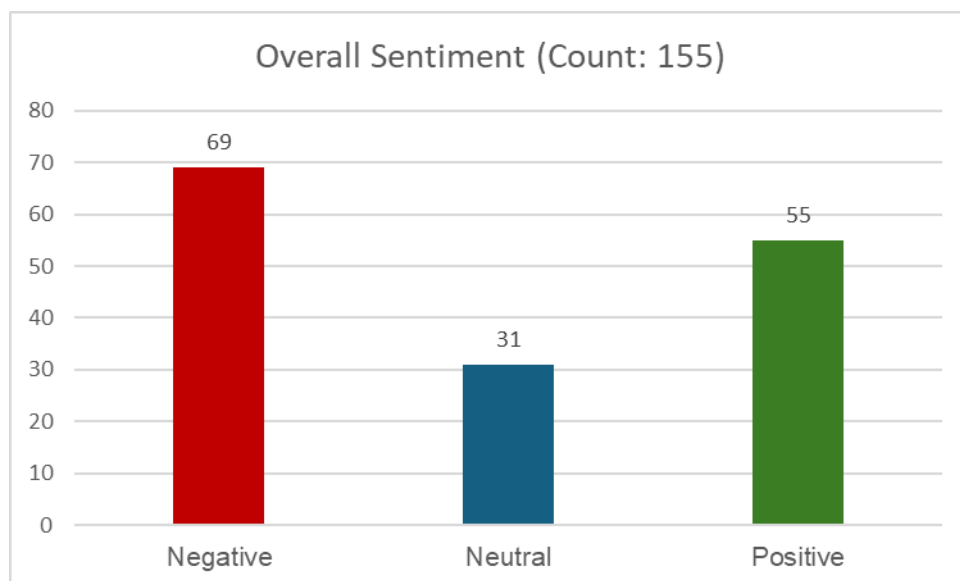


Figure 9. Overall audience sentiment (Count)

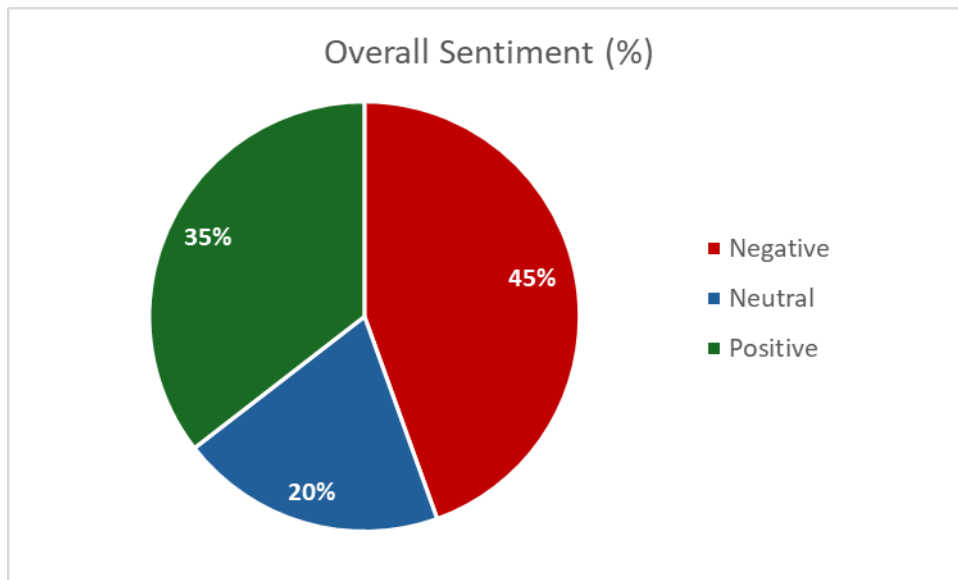


Figure 10. Overall audience sentiment (Ratio)

The majority of viewers, constituting 80 percent, either expressed strong critiques of the show or provided enthusiastic praise for it. This polarization suggests that the television series has evoked intense reactions among its audience, prompting them to either vehemently disapprove or wholeheartedly commend its portrayal of the historical era and figures. Conversely, a smaller portion of viewers, roughly 20 percent, occupies a more moderate stance with a balanced perspective that neither strongly condemns nor unequivocally applauds the series. This pattern of sentiment distribution shows a substantial level of engagement and emotional investment from the audience, bordering on fandomization of memory, and contributing to a diverse range of perceptions and interpretations surrounding the show's thematic representation.

This raises the question of what factors have contributed to the emergence of these polarized views and how the audience has interpreted the series in a way that has generated such extreme positions.

3.4.2 Thematic Analysis of Reception Data

To explore the rationale for these sentiments, a comprehensive thematic analysis of the reviews has been conducted, aiming to uncover the dominant underlying reasons for these reactions.

See figures 11 and 12:

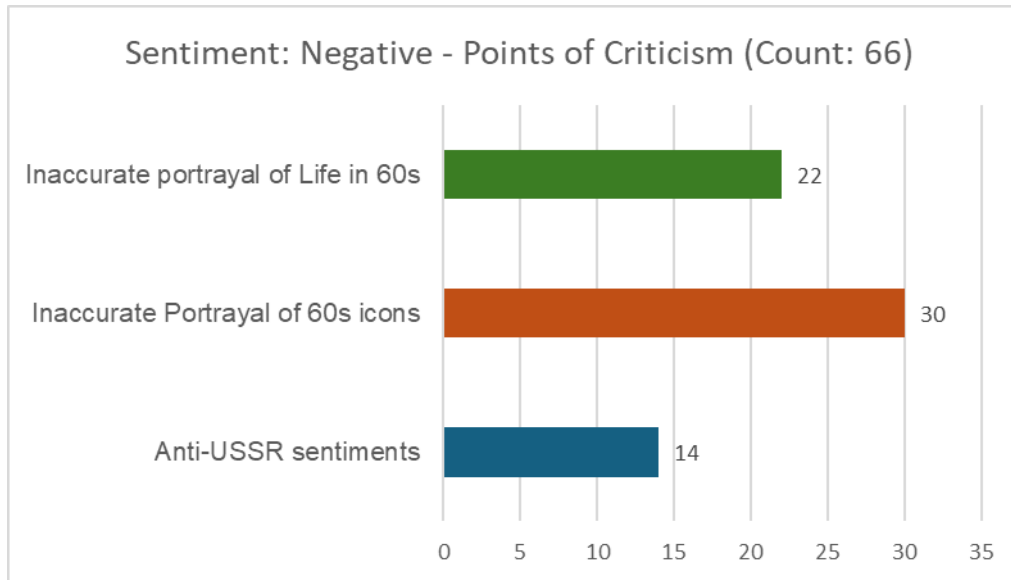


Figure 10. Negative Sentiment - Themes of Criticism (Count)

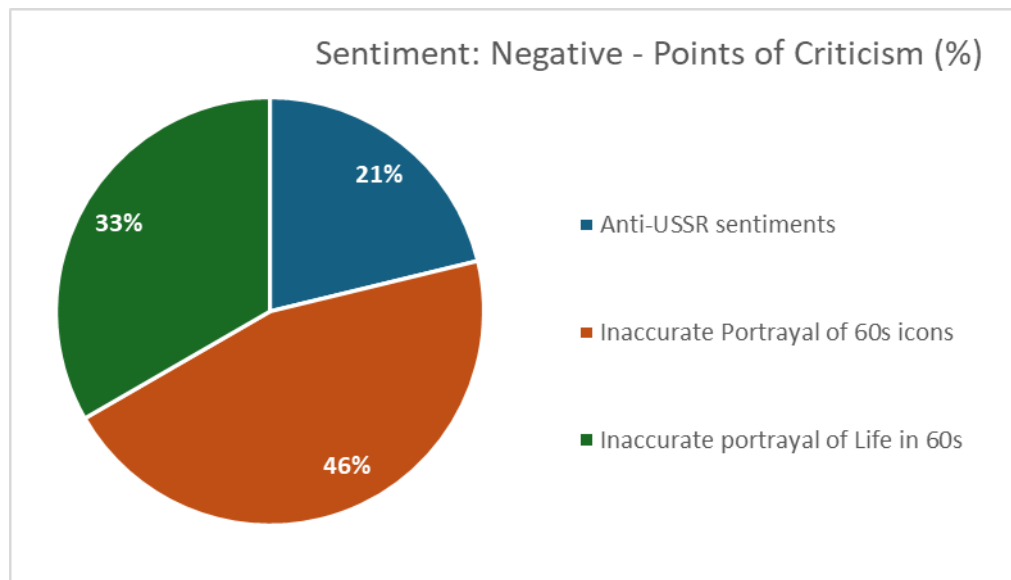


Figure 11. Negative Sentiment - Themes of Criticism (Ratio)

Three primary themes have emerged as prominent sources of negative sentiments, accounting for the majority of cases:

1. Inaccurate Portrayal of 1960s Icons (46%):

A significant portion of negative sentiments stemmed from viewers' perception that the series inaccurately depicted the renowned figures of the 1960s, either through character misrepresentation, distortion of historical facts about them, or deviations from the actual personalities of those depicted. Along this theme, the series is criticized widely for what is labeled as *misleading* the contemporary youth about the cultural icons of Soviet society in the 1960s, and for depicting these literary and artistic figures particularly as chain-smoking binge drinkers leading a rather parasitic lifestyle. This is an intriguing point, as the mass awareness of the health-related consequences of smoking and alcohol abuse, to the extent that it has become intertwined with values, morality, and ethics, is a relatively recent phenomenon and during the era depicted in the series, the widespread use of these substances was not unusual. This outcry and condemnation can therefore be interpreted as an instance of appropriation of the past by the audiences and application of the present value system to it, with a push for an idealized, imaginary and nostalgic past to be free from what is currently considered as vices.

2. Inaccurate Portrayal of Thaw-Era Everyday Life (33%):

Another prevalent theme among negative reviews is the perceived lack of authenticity in portraying the everyday life and atmosphere of the Thaw period. Viewers in this category expressed disappointment with the series' failure to capture the nuances, cultural elements, and overall ambiance of that time. A strong sub-theme here is criticism of the flawed depiction of the economic situation of the era, glamorizing the 1960s Soviet life, excluding the working class and ordinary citizens, as also observed in the previous chapter analyzing the narrative of the series, and the show's focus on exaggerated luxurious life that might have been accessible

to only a few. On the social and cultural level, a notable portion of criticism targets the depiction of intimate relations between the protagonists and particularly between Waxon and Ralissa, pointing out that it significantly diverges from the norms and values of society at the time. This group also criticizes the show for portraying the protagonists as spiteful characters whose main motivation in life is personal gain, and excluding the friendly, kind, and helpful culture of the people during this era.

3) Labeling the series as an Anti-Soviet Production (21%):

A smaller yet noteworthy group of viewers have labeled the series as an outright anti-Soviet production. This perception likely stems from interpretations of the show's content that may be construed as overly critical or negative toward the Soviet era and its ideals. This subset of reviews expresses heightened levels of idealization of life during the Soviet period and exhibits a lack of tolerance for even subtle critiques of any facets of life during that time. Interestingly, it seems that for this minority faction of ardent enthusiasts of the nostalgic, imaginary past, the Soviet life, particularly during the Thaw period, is so deeply idealized that it has become an almost sacred topic, immune to even the slightest hints of criticism. Even the embellished portrayals discussed earlier, which depict a relatively affluent, well-to-do society, fall short of meeting their expectations, and any deviations from a certain perspective on these years are met with outright rejection.

Conversely, the thematic analysis of reviews expressing positive sentiment presents a completely contrasting perspective, particularly with regards to the accurate depiction of the Thaw era and its historical figures. See figures 13 and 14:

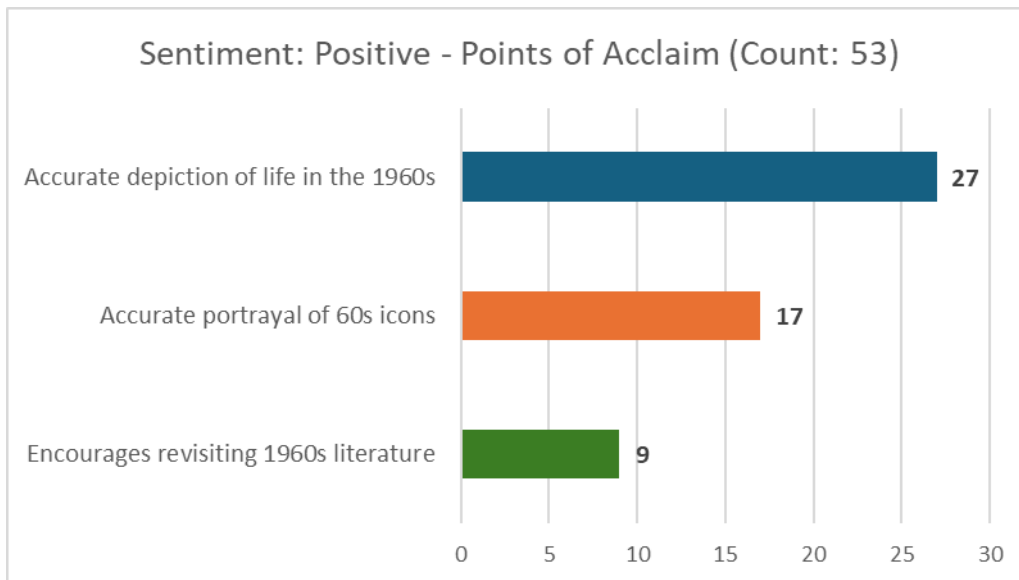


Figure 12. Positive Sentiment - Themes of Approval (Count)

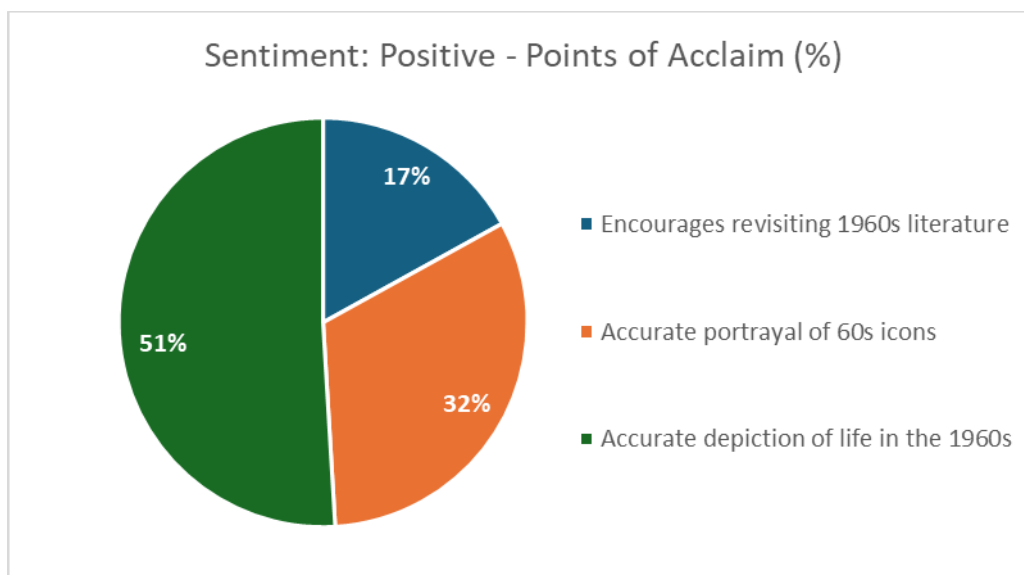


Figure 13. Positive Sentiment - Themes of Approval (Ratio)

The sources of positive sentiment can be categorized into the following primary themes:

1. Accurate Portrayal of Life in the 1960s (51%):

A significant majority of positive reviews laud the series for effectively capturing the *essence* and *spirit* of the Thaw era. Viewers within this group believe that the show has managed to authentically portray the atmosphere, optimism, and social dynamics that characterized that

period. In contrast to the group that had emphasized on inaccuracy in depiction of life during the Thaw who were focused on the particulars of the period, most of the representatives of this group predominantly show an interest in the depiction of the overall “spirit” of the era, friendship, and nostalgic human relations. Those who do mention particulars about the economic situation believe that the general sense of prosperity depicted in the show is accurate – everyone had jobs, a roof over their heads, received quality education and healthcare and so on.

2. Accurate Portrayal of 1960s Iconic Figures (32%):

Another substantial theme among positive reviews is the series' commendable depiction of the iconic figures from the 1960s. Most viewers in this category appreciate the authenticity with which the historical personalities are brought to life, highlighting their relevance and impact on that era. Again, this group takes a general perspective, appreciating that a television project has brought forward the subject and the names of these protagonists, which in their views helps with not losing them to dusty pages of forgotten history.

A smaller group, notably, believe that the series is indeed “accurate” in the ways it has depicted these figures, but add that while the intelligentsia back in the time were generously provided for by the state and had access to a host of luxuries that others did not, all they did was in fact leading the flawed lifestyle presented in the show and criticized the state at the same time.

3. Encouragement of Literary and Artistic Revisitation (17%):

A noteworthy, albeit less prevalent theme, is the perception that the series serves as a catalyst for revisiting the literature and other artistic works of the 1960s. This sentiment is shared both by older generations who express that they would like to revisit the literature of that era, and the younger audiences who have now been triggered to familiarize themselves with the literary figures of the 1960s.

3.5 Conclusion: Agenda Setting Role of Media in the Context of Thaw

As discussed in the methodology chapter, agenda-setting theory has primarily been applied to journalistic TV content, particularly in the context of examining the relationship between the issues covered by news media and the public's opinions about political matters, figures, or decisions. This theory places the media, especially television, as a central force actively involved in shaping public discourse. However, if we extend this notion to collective cultural memory and incorporate non-journalistic content, which is the case for this study, the fundamental questions posed by agenda-setting theory remain relevant, as they revolve around the negotiations between the media, the public, and interest groups in trying to form each other's agenda. The primary inquiry that scholars have pursued in this field is whether the media can indeed set the agenda for public discussion, and if it can, does this influence come with the imposition of specific attributes? In other words, does the media not only dictate what topics to think about, but also, how to think about them?

Judging by the reception data, it is clear that it has been a very emotional experience to watch the series for the majority of the members of the audience. This emotional engagement is evident not only in their harsh criticisms or passionate approval concerning the accuracy of depictions of life during the Thaw period or the portrayal of 1960s icons, but also in the way their discussions expand to encompass various other aspects of Soviet history. The comparisons they make between the protagonists and their favorite literary and music icons, how they refer back to their own memories of the same era or the later periods in 1970s and 1980s, or how they talk about their impressions from it based on stories they have heard from their parents and grandparents, it all points to the success of the series in setting a stage to talk about the Soviet past in general and the Thaw period in particular. In view of this, it can be concluded that the media in this instance has been successful in bringing the object in question, the everyday life in the past, to the foreground of the discussion, i.e., setting the agenda for public

discourse. Even when the series does not reflect the popular convictions, it still manages to ignite passionate debate in the public sphere and maintain the audience's active engagement with the subject.

On the second tier of agenda setting, which has to do with attributes, or telling the public *how* to think about a subject, the series has encountered less success. Judging by the reviews, this can be due to the fact that individuals still retain their personal memories and also rely on alternative sources to construct their own notions of this idealized nostalgic past. Naturally, it is not only the series that depicts a redacted, appropriated reading of the Thaw. The public, too, have their own ways of appropriating realities from the past for present use, and the seductive nostalgic quality of these pre-existing takes clouds their vision to such an extent that they become critical of the series for spotlighting even authentic aspects of life, as evidenced by criticisms directed towards the portrayal of imperfect behavioral traits by the icons of the 1960s, which in the language of Siegfried Schmidt is an evidence of politics of remembering being '*steered by moral values (197)*'¹¹⁸.

Overall and with regards to the agenda setting role of the media in this particular case, it can be concluded that the series undeniably functions as a stimulus for evoking nostalgic reminiscences, regardless of whether it garners positive or predominantly negative reactions. The latter reactions generally stem from the notion that these depictions inadequately capture the essence of the "golden era" in question. In achieving this, the series effectively sustains the audience's engagement with the subject matter. However, its efficacy in guiding the audience's "how" of remembering the Thaw remains considerably limited. This can be primarily attributed to the pre-existing memories and perceptions about life during the Thaw, some of which are rooted in communicative memory, a more formidable force in shaping individual perspectives.

¹¹⁸ Schmidt, "Memory and Remembrance."

Hence, it is conceivable that as time passes and new generations emerge, the media's influence in shaping people's recollections of this subject could potentially strengthen, particularly as the influence of communicative memory naturally wanes over time. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that in the present moment and at this juncture, the media has not yet attained that level of dominance.

Concluding remarks

In the context of this case study, two competing forces that seem to be contributing to the shaping of the collective memory of everyday life during the 1960s were examined. The first influence stems from the public domain, influenced by pre-existing sources of cultural and communicative memory and oral traditions, manifested through the references found within user reviews and reactions, including personal recollections of life during the late Soviet period, and memories passed down from the generation that lived through the 1960s. The television series itself constitutes the second foundation, offering its own culturally mediated representations of the 1960s era. At times, this portrayal diverges from the public perceptions, which has led to strong criticisms as covered in the section on Reception. However, there are also many instances where the two seem to be aligned since no objection is raised. For example, as previously noted, the series' reductive depiction of female characters, despite its factual errors, has not elicited any criticism. In contrast, notable criticism is pointed at the series' representation of intimate relationships between protagonists and a significant number of reviewers express disapproval of the series portraying female protagonists as readily engaging in sexual encounters. Paired together and keeping in mind the presentist culture that considers the *Present* as the reference point for interpretation of the past, these two instances can be seen, among other things, as reflecting the contemporary society's tolerance for patriarchal norms, which extends over the domain of memory and gets applied to the imaginary bygone utopia.

Another means by which Presentism shields the series from scrutiny is the noticeable absence, both within the film and among the reviews, of a crucial aspect that should form the core of a production supposedly depicting dissidents in the Soviet Union: the question of freedom. Remarkably, the *Mysterious Passion* sidesteps this key issue, reducing the concept of dissent and struggle for liberty, at its best, to a few glimpses of little inconveniences, such as discussions hinting at possible publication censorship, or the protagonists' surveillance by

intelligence agencies. Equally striking is the fact that reviews of the film do not challenge this narrative choice. The key to this may lie in the present state of human society and its prevailing yearning for security. Across the globe, the uncertain younger generations grapple with what Sigmund Bauman dubs "fluid fear," a formless danger or uncertainty whose roots, sources, and timing remain unknown, yet its psychological burden is a constant presence ¹¹⁹. While we enjoy more freedom than any previous generation before us, our sense of material security regarding employment, housing, education, healthcare, and other essentials remains precarious, and contemporary Russia is certainly not excluded from these rather global trends. In this landscape, the series' evasion of the freedom question, and its apparent immunity to critique, can be attributed to the uncertainties prevalent in our world today.

During these exchanges, both the media and the public bring their own simplified, reductive perspectives. If the media's portrayals offer a reductive representation of everyday life during the 1960s, the critical segment of the audience also exhibits a reductive perspective in its idealistic views. Thinking back of the agenda setting role of television in this context, it is plausible then to imagine that the authority of television in shaping the attributes of cultural memory related to subjects of everyday life during Thaw (that is, *how* to remember the subject) is limited. Unlike productions that deal with subjects such as WWII, which is closely linked to national identity and pride, or rather distant topics such as depictions of Tsarist Russia in films, the landscape of collective memory of the 'less political' everyday life during the later Soviet period, at least currently, is too polyphonic and fluid to be monopolized by a singular narrative by television or other sources. Simultaneously, the dominant idealistic views of nostalgic life during the USSR make it challenging for the media to propose a narrative that significantly diverges from the prevailing perspective which, due to pre-existing forces of cultural and communicative memory which come with nearly complete omissions of unpleasant historical

¹¹⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Fear*.

aspects such as repressions, shortages, long queues, and so on, and are filled instead with attributes selectively chosen or manufactured to portray an almost perfect utopia. This suggests that concerning the remembrance of everyday life in this era, the challenge doesn't lie in a broad array of opposing narratives competing with each other, but rather within a narrow spectrum of narratives that differ primarily in the extent of their nostalgic reverence.

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