Chapter 1:

More than Nostalgia

Late Socialism in Contemporary Russian Television Series

Mark Lipovetsky

> Nostalgia is not always about the past.
> It can be retrospective but also prospective.
> *(Svetlana Boym 2002: xvii)*

1. Introduction

More than 20 years have passed since Svetlana Boym published her famous, now classic book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002), in which she, on the one hand, defined nostalgia as the necessary shadow of modernity, and on the other hand, suggested a distinction between restorative and reflexive nostalgia.[1] While the former embodies the longing for a lost symbolic order, simultaneously (re)producing its idealised mythology, the latter "dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (Boym 2002: xviii) – as exemplified by the works of Joseph Brodsky [Iosif Brodskii] and Ilya Kabakov [Il'ia Kabakov].

However, I would like to argue that since the second decade of the 21st century, the meaning of the representation of the late socialist past has drastically changed and no longer fits the concept of nostalgia, be it restorative or reflexive. One may find a telling example of this new quality of nostalgia in recent Russian TV series depicting the Soviet 1960s-80s. I will focus on several of them: *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*, 2013, directed and produced by Valerii Todorovskii), *Black Marketeers* (*Fartsa*, 2015, dir. Egor Baranov), *Our Happy Tomorrow* (*Nashe schastlivoe zavtra*, 2016, dir. Igor Kopylov), and *Optimists* (*Optimisty*, 2017, dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii). There are certainly many more miniseries on the Thaw and

1 This article is a shortened version of the article "Bolshe, chem nostalgiia. Pozdnii Sotsializm v Teleserialakh 2010-kh godov" [More than Nostalgia. Late Socialism in TV series of the 2010s"]. In: *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*,168/3 2021, 127–147, in co-authorship with Tatiana Mikhailova.

Stagnation that appeared in the 2010s, such as *Trouble in Store* (*Delo gastronoma no.1*, literary *The Case of Supermarket No. 1*, 2011, dir. Sergei Ashkenazi), *Furtseva* (2011, dir. Sergei Popov), *The Dark Side of the Moon* (*Obratnaia storona luny*, 2012, dir. Aleksandr Kott), *The Red Queen* (*Krasnaia Koroleva*, 2015, dir. Alëna Rainer), *Margarita Nazarova* (2016, dir. Konstantin Maksimov), *Liudmila Gurchenko* (2016, dir. Sergei Aldonin), *A Mysterious Passion* (*Tainstvennaia strast'*, 2016, dir. Vlad Furman), *Hotel "Rossiya"* (*Gostinitsa Rossiia*, 2017, dir. Sergei Sentsov), and *Little Birch Tree* (*Berëzka*, 2018 dir. Aleksandr Baranov) and many others.

All these series hardly fit a concept of nostalgia due to their focus on illicit, yet systemic aspects of the late Soviet lifestyle – black market trading, corruption, illegal business, bohemian freedom, or a semi-legal industry of glamour. Typically, the protagonist confronts Soviet authorities, while the latter are represented by various officers of the 'organs' and party apparatchiks. These TV series highlight and elevate those who were persecuted and humiliated in the 1960s-70s – the so called *stiliagi* (hipsters, dandies), *fartsovshchiki* (slang for black marketeers), *tsekhoviki* (colloquial term for black market producers) – as true heroes of their time and forerunners of the future (i.e., of the post-Soviet present). However, none of these films selects dissidents as their heroes – political opposition to communist ideology is not what they highlight, but rather capitalism and glamour *within* 'highly-developed socialism' (*razvitoi sotsializm*).[2]

2. An Aesthetic Utopia

Valerii Todorovskii's *The Thaw* was indeed a trend-setter, although Todorovskii did not hide the fact that he was directly inspired by Matthew Weiner's American television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015). *The Thaw* gained incredible popularity due to its tasteful and at the same time dazzling stylisation of the fashions, music, dances and even faces of the 1960s. Inspired by Todorovskii's suggestion, many critics initially interpreted *The Thaw* as the post-Soviet version of *Mad Men*, only to discover more differences than similarities with the AMC cult series.

First and foremost, Todorovskii only slightly imitates Matthew Weiner's retromania with his attention to minute details of the time. Todorovskii warned when the series had just been released: "I didn't try telling how it was in reality. There is documentary cinema and other directors seeking to reconstruct the epoch. And I have created a myth. For example, I decided that all women should be beautiful [in my film]" (Efimov 2013).

While creating his 'myth', the Russian director does not avoid stereotypes, rather he fills them with live energy and genuine charm. He openly constructs his series on the basis of a doubling between a film that the characters are producing, and their relations with one another that replicate the affairs of the personages in the film, but more brutally

2 One may point to Petr Buslov's *Vysotsky. Thank You for Being Alive* (*Vysotsky. Spasibo, chto zhivoi*, 2011) and Vlad Furman's *A Mysterious Passion* (*Tainstvennaia strast'*, 2016), but the representation of poets who personified the Thaw and Stagnation is so ridiculous in these films exactly because they are stripped of any depth and the protagonists are completely reduced to one-dimensional – flat according to Fredric Jameson – icons of glamour.

and with a greater psychological depth. Following the example of the cult film of the Soviet 60s, Federico Fellini's *8* $\frac{1}{2}$ (1963), Todorovskii blurs the border between filmic reality, artificially created in front of our eyes, and the personal dramas of the film characters. By doing so, he unnoticeably evacuates the characters' political and social troubles into the realm of fiction, thus removing the last obstacles for the representation of the Thaw as the triumph of style and elegance – in other words, as an *aesthetic utopia*.

The Thaw appeared in the atmosphere after the protests against the rigged Duma elections and the 'creative class's' attempt to formulate its political will in the winter of 2011–2012 were suppressed, and Todorovskii's series offered an answer to the despair following the failed revolution. The critic Ksenia Larina (2013) argues that Todorovskii depicts the world of Soviet filmmakers as the epitome of a parallel reality of freedom that cannot avoid compromises with the system but, nevertheless, heroically preserves its independence. Andrei Arkhangel'skii (2013), on the contrary, sees in this film a justification of conformism – "a non-ambiguous suggestion to revisit the contract between today's authorities and power and to reorganise it by using the Thaw as a model." In my view, neither of these critical assessments is accurate: indeed, Todorovskii seeks the origins of today's creative class, but he locates the intelligentsia's uniting platform not in its shared ideas, but in its shared lifestyle – chaotic, self-destructive, at times hysterical, at times sentimental, but always *aesthetically attractive*. Ilya Kalinin's analysis of the protest movement of 2011–2012 clearly demonstrates that *The Thaw* with emphasis on the stylistic appeal of the intelligentsia's lifeworld, indeed manifested the protest's actual "ideology", or rather, its substitute: "The political in this protest movement operated as just one other form of the stylistic, and the political protest served as the sign of the stylistic split between 'the cultured us' and 'cultureless them'." (Kalinin 2017) In Kalinin's opinion, this emphasis on style betrayed the elitist character of the protest, which, because of this, was doomed to failure.

In *The Thaw*, one may also detect the formation of the performative discourse for a sociocultural self-identification of the 'creative class' that emerged after 2012 and which Mikhail Iampol'skii has defined in his eponymous book of 2018 as a "park of culture" (*park kul'tury*): "the hipster lifestyle becomes the battlefield, while pogroms and arrests are irrelevant to it. […] Violence not only coexists with the new lifestyle of today's Moscow; it constitutes its hidden but necessary component." (2018: 15, 29) This formula perfectly fits *The Thaw*, where the bohemian freedom of the filmmakers' circle is defenceless before the aggressive pressure and drunken invasions of the police investigator; where the film administrator never forgets his recent time in the prison camps of the Gulag, where gender repression is normalised, and where almost everyone is eager to turn away from the protagonist, a cameraman Khrustalev (Evgenii Tsyganov), when he is publicly shamed as a coward.

Figure 1.1: Film still from Evgenii Tsyganov as Khustalev in the TV series The Thaw *(2013)*

This penetration of violence within the television series into the lifestyle undermines the entire liberational project that this style is supposed to embody. Khrustalev and his friend, director Egor Miachin (Aleksandr Iatsenko) dream about the war film – judging by fragmentary references to the script, they have in mind something similar to Aleksei German's *Trial on the Road* (*Proverka na dorogakh*, 1971) with its stern monochromic style of 1960s 'severe realism'. However, the film that Khrustalev and Miachin are actually shooting within the twelve episodes of the series, whose hack dramaturgy creates counterpoints to the characters' stories and whose climactic optimistic song constitutes a very important part of the miniseries finale, belongs to a completely different genre, namely Soviet musical comedy. Its semi-parodic title *The Girl and the Brigadier* (*Devushka i brigadier*) refers to Ivan Pyriev's infamous musicals of the 1930s and 40s, while its musical style more resonates with Eldar Riazanov's *The Carnival Night* (*Karnaval'naia noch'*, 1956). If the dialogues and situations sound like a mockery, *The Thaw* stylised songs (composer – Konstantin Meladze) stick in the viewer's mind, shaping the series' long-lasting aftertaste.

Notably, both references to Pyriev's musical comedy films and *The Carnival Night* relate to the period preceding the time allegedly depicted in *The Thaw*. Since the drama about the partisan unit remains an abstract dream, and the hack comedy materialises in front of the viewers' eyes, it is the latter rather than the former that arises as the manifestation of Thaw cinema and art in general. This substitution is quite telling: while narrating his characters' artistic compromises for the sake of their future – yet unrealised – project, Todorovskii makes the Thaw, with its sexual freedom, irony and style, indistinguishable from late Stalinist aesthetics with its 'conflictlessness'. Notably, in *The Thaw*, much like in *The Carnival Night*, there is only one evil character – a police investigator Tsanin (Vasilii Mishchenko) – surrounded by various positive and invariably appealing personages.

Figure 1.2: Film still from a scene from the fictitious comedy The Girl and Brigadier *in* The Thaw *(2013)*

Indeed, in *The Thaw*, we are dealing with what Fredric Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* called "utopianism after the end of utopia" (1991: 160). According to Jameson, new utopian discourses that appear after the disappointment in leftist utopias of revolutionary change, display "the development of a whole range of properly spatial utopias in which the transformation of social relations and political institutions is projected onto the vision of place and landscape, including the human body" (ibid: 160). The crisis of leftist utopias in the West of the 1970s-80s is comparable with the disappointment associated with Perestroika and its liberational ideology that begins in the 1990s and reaches its peak in the 2010s. Hence, my hypothesis is that the TV series under discussion transform nostalgia into something more profound – a new utopian discourse, which, at the same time, is radically different from our traditional idea of utopia, as any example of 'utopianism after the end of utopia' would be.

The eight-episode television series *Black Marketeers* by the young film director Egor Baranov – later known for the mystical thriller *Gogol. The Beginning* (*Gogol'. Nachalo*, 2017) – is an illuminating case of such utopian spatialisation according to Jameson. The story is set in Moscow beginning with the protagonist's return from Siberia, where he spent a year at the construction of the Bratsk Power Station, which thanks to Evgenii Evtushenko's poem *The Bratsk Station* (*Bratskaia GES*, 1965) is a symbol of the Thaw itself. Even in the most dangerous moments, when an escape from Moscow would save them from trouble, the film's characters never leave the city – this idea literally never crosses their (and the filmmakers') minds. Moscow here emerges as the space of the materialised utopia filled with recognisable symbols of greatness and success (from the legendary opera and pop singer Muslim Magomaev to cosmonaut Iurii Gagarin) as well as with invariably beautiful and fashionable men and women. In the lavish Moscow setting, *Black Marketeers* portrays the life of black marketeers, producers of recordings 'on bones' (i.e., on X-ray film), and illegal hard currency traders, experienced by four young friends, as a series of exciting adventures. These adventures, according to the series' logic, initially stem from the idealistic cult of friendship, but more generally from the youthful desire to enjoy a fulfilled life. Accordingly, Andrei, the central character and

the group's leader (played by Aleksandr Petrov), formulates the essence of the Thaw with Robert Rozhdestvenskii's poetic line: "zhit' vzakhleb" [to live fully, in full breath].

An interpretation of the protagonists' criminal business as a chain of exhilarating adventures is emphasised by repeated parallels between the four central characters and Alexandre Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, as well as by Andrei's affinity with D'Artagnan, an extremely popular figure in the late Soviet Union thanks to Georgii Iungval'd-Khil'kevich's television series *D'Artagnan and Three Musketeers* (*D'Artan'ian i tri mushketëra*) from 1978. Notably, the system of characters reminiscent of Dumas' *Three Musketeers* and of the Soviet TV adaption is characteristic of several contemporary TV series under discussion. It serves both as a sign of the characters' free spirit and their problematic relations with the system of power – both being subversive towards it and inseparable from it.

The protagonist of *Black Marketeers* is also an aspiring writer whose first story has been already published in the most popular literary journal of the Thaw period, *Iunost'* (*Youth*). This motif allows the filmmakers to engage the world of literary glamour, represented not only by a fictional femme fatale Valeria Lanskaia (Ekaterina Volkova) but also non-fictional, although highly stylised prototypes like the known authors Vasilii Aksenov, Gennadii Shpalikov, and Mikhail Svetlov. However, the meaning of the 'literary' motif is more substantial. When engaged in his life of adventures, Andrei either cannot write or writes poorly – obviously, his creativity is transferred elsewhere, or in other words, his life adventures substitute his writings. The writing, according to Jameson, also stands for spatialisation of the temporal and, like in *The Thaw*, suggests the evacuation of social problems from the realm of history to the realm of timeless fiction.

The impression that *Black Marketeers* is a timeless adventure rather than a historical narrative also suggests spatialisation instead of temporalisation. The effect of flatness increases with the growing significance of Pont, a larger-than-life villain, played by Evgenii Stychkin. In the film's finale, also in full accordance with the expectations inscribed into the adventure genre, Andrei is miraculously exonerated during the trial, which otherwise would lead to his long-term imprisonment and maybe even execution (as suggested by the story of a historical figure, famous black-market businessman Ian Rokotov, who was executed in 1961 and briefly appears in *Black Marketeers*, played by the star of *The Thaw*, Evgenii Tsyganov). As a *deus ex machina* a KGB officer appears (played by Timofei Tribuntsev): throughout the series he protected Pont as his informer and collaborator, but in the final episode, right before the verdict, he delivers materials to the court, pointing to Pont as the murderer and absolving Andrei. The evil character of the KGB officer thus becomes a saviour figure. This accumulation of improbabilities brings the impression of an adventure flatness to its maximum, only to be broken in the series' finale.

Andrei is exonerated due to his agreement to be a KGB informant and basically to become a new Pont. The viewers learn about this during the final scene, when Andrei's friends overwhelmed by joy meet him at the steps of the courthouse. Only Andrei's mother understands that his miraculous escape from imprisonment suggests a dramatic self-betrayal, and to his admission of guilt: "I've done so many horrible things", she responds bitterly: "And you'll do even more in the future."[3]

3 All translations from Russian quotes are mine if not noted otherwise.

Figure 1.3: Film still from Black Marketeers *(2015)*

Only here the adventure narrative ends, and a different temporality takes an upper hand, but this is where the film ends too.

3. Remembrance of Idealism Past

In general, almost all the protagonists of these new Russian television series appear to be people who possess true creativity and seek ways to realise it. The viewer understands that only the rigidity of the Soviet system turns their creativity into a crime; under the post-Soviet condition it would be a secure foundation for their social success. However, the main utopian effect of these TV series seems to be associated with the decoupling of capitalism and cynicism, manifesting a tangible mirage of non-cynical profiteering and, by default, politics, conveniently situated in the late Soviet past.

Notably, all these series, with a varying degree of success, try to revive the moralistic narrative of the 1960s, according to which an ethical compromise is the worst crime a person can commit, and that the path of compromises inevitably leads to self-destruction. This narrative clearly represents an antithesis to cynical contempt towards moral values. In post-Soviet television it first reappeared in *The Thaw*, where Khrustalev loses everything, first and foremost the prospect of making his dream film, because during the war he had accepted his father's offer (or rather a plea) to save him from military service. In the climactic scene of *Our Happy Tomorrow*, the series about underground Soviet capitalists – the so-called *tsekhoviki* – in 1989, in the midst of Perestroika, the *tsekhovik* Lugovoi, who by now has lost all his wealth but won his beloved woman, with pathos suggests to his nemesis Kozyrev, a professional criminal, to ask himself: "At what moment did you betray yourself?" This narrative of moral betrayal in many ways resonates in the finale of *Black Marketeers*.

In Soviet films of the 1960s-70s, the function of moralists and guardians of idealism, was embodied by the officers of the organs – most frequently the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the KGB. In *The Thaw*, one such character appears, the aforementioned Tsanin, who investigates the death of the screenwriter Kostia Parshin and eventually rises as an epitome of entrenched Stalinism, systemic hatred towards the intelligentsia and its culture, and, generally speaking, becomes a personification of Soviet cynicism of power.

A similar character appears in *Black Marketeers*, and he openly represents the KGB. Timofei Tribuntsev plays Captain Ivanov as a disgusting character, and the film represents his villainy with almost a comical excess. Not only does he cover up for Pont, who pays him a significant fee for 'protection' – thus foreshadowing business practices of post-Soviet law enforcement officials, the so called 'siloviki' – but his henchmen also torture suspects imitating the Stalinist period. The KGB villainy is counterweighted in *Black Marketeers* by the moral authority and support provided by an honest policeman, who happens to be the father of the protagonist's love interest, German Mikhailovich Vostrikov, played by Aleksei Serebriakov. Notably, in *Little Birch Tree*, a 2018 TV series about the famed Soviet folk-dance ensemble, Serebriakov plays a KGB officer, who becomes the guardian angel for the ensemble and especially its director, while all villainy is delegated to a small clerk from the Ministry of Culture. From *The Thaw*, to *Little Birch Tree*, from 2013 to 2018, the power figure has accomplished a full transformation from a super-cynic to a guardian angel.

Such a 'splitting' of the figure representing the Soviet regime and its violence, into a grotesque villain and magic helper, is quite typical for all the series under discussion. It reflects filmmakers' ambivalence towards the Soviet system, or more generally, towards the Soviet past. On the one hand, the Soviet system serves as the obstacle to the protagonists' self-realisation. On the other, it stimulates their ingenuity and challenges their talents. The system harasses and represses them, while at the same time producing the *demand* for underground capitalist business and adding the significant *cultural capital* of rebellion and martyrdom to the transgressors, from *stiliagi* and modernist filmmakers to black marketeers. In short, this ambivalence reveals a co-dependence of the utopian non-cynical capitalism, as depicted in these films, and the repressive Soviet system, a co-dependence that deserves a closer look.

4. "A Deep State" of Late Socialism

On 11 February, 2019 Vladislav Surkov, at the time still Putin's closest aid, published an article titled "Putin's Lasting State". Among many suspicious claims about the greatness of Putin's state and its 'export potential', Surkov argues that this political order is more *honest* than its Western counterparts. Why? Because Western states apparently are secretly administered by the 'deep state' – an alliance of powerful agents and organisations, legal and illegal alike, that operates beyond democratic institutions and blatantly uses violence and corruption, alluding to a staple of multiple conspiracy theories. On the contrary, the Russian state

> is not split up into deep and external; it is built as a whole, with all of its parts and its manifestations facing out. The most brutal constructions of its authoritarian frame are displayed as part of the façade, undisguised by any architectural embellishments. The bureaucratic apparatus, even when it tries to do something clandestinely, does not try too hard to cover its tracks, as if assuming that "everyone understands everything anyway." (Surkov 2019)

If unpacked, Surkov's statement reveals an Orwellian paradox at its core: the Russian state is honest because it is openly deceptive and corrupt. Surprisingly Surkov's revelations did not cause much stir (if any) in the Russian media, apparently this logic has been adopted by contemporary Russian culture long before Surkov articulated it. More precisely, it has been cultivated by various means, including popular culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Surkov's self-righteous legitimisation of violence and corruption directly stems from the discourse shaped by the TV series I discuss here. The contemporary social, political and economic order is represented in them as the direct heir not to the formal Soviet system, as Western analysts frequently believe, but to the informal 'deep state' that was hidden underneath late socialism's surface and absorbed its brightest and most dynamic elements. By the means of this imagined genealogy, contemporary Russian social order is placed *beyond* any legal or moral judgment, as the 'third', hybrid and utopian, path, situated *between capitalism and communism*.

Another TV series, *Optimists* (2017–2021) based on the idea by Mikhail Shprits and Mikhail Idov, directed by the famous Aleksei Popogrebskii, author of the acclaimed films *Koktebel'* (2003), and *How I Ended this Summer* (*Kak ia provel ėtim letom*, 2010), highlights a connection between the imaginary Soviet deep state and contemporary Russia's politics. Notably, this TV series depicting Soviet diplomats in the early 1960s, received direct approval from the 'profile ministry' – in this case from the head of the Russian Foreign Office, Sergei Lavrov (cf. [Anon.] 2017). This is especially curious since at the same time as Lavrov's approval, *Parlamentskaia gazeta* published an angry letter from one of the Russian 'senators' Andrei Sobolev (2017), who felt offended by the fact that "in the difficult international situation of the 1960s Soviet diplomats are drinking vodka, sleeping around and endlessly smoking foreign cigarettes."

The series begins with the American exhibition in Sokolniki in 1959, which obviates the cultural gap between Soviet and American understandings of international politics. The *Optimists* are the staff members of the newly created Information-Analytical Group and their group's creator is an American communist of Latvian descent Ruta Blaumane (Severija Janušauskaitė, a future star of Tim Tykwer's *Babylon Berlin*). Their new boss Viktor Biriukov also features, a seasoned party apparatchik, with military experience not only from WWII but also from Budapest in 1956, he was one of those officers who crushed the Hungarian uprising (played by Vladimir Vdovichenkov, a former star of the TV series *Brigada* about 1990s gangster capitalism).

Figure 1.4: Film still from Ruta and Biriukov in Optimists *(2017–2021)*

Both Blaumane and Biriukov are transgressive, yet in a different way. As Popogrebskii explains, Biriukov from the very beginning is depicted as a seasoned Stalinist, while Blaumane is cheating on her husband, a heroic pilot, and without any hesitation writes a slanderous denunciation implicating Biriukov after their first rough encounter. Young characters are also far from being Soviet poster boys, in certain ways, they are borderline Soviet outcasts – a Jew, a son of reemigrants who perished in the Gulag, a secret American agent. Paradoxically, their marginality in relation to Soviet standards makes them most fitting for the role of transgressive reformers.

The first half of the series unfolds as a narrative about the 'westernisation' or, rather 'Americanisation' of Soviet diplomatic style – 'optimists' educate themselves and teach others how to utilise the media for political purposes and how to manipulate Western public opinion. These funny or not so funny episodes include storylines about the American pilot Powers, canine cosmonauts Belka and Strelka, or the media representation of Soviet fishermen lost in the ocean and found by Americans (an obvious reworking of the 1960 story about the Soviet Sergeant Ashkat Ziganshin and his crew). Apparently, Soviet diplomacy learns from the Western media how to do politics in the society of spectacle. Proudly and with panache, the series' protagonists demonstrate that the withholding and distortion of information is the most effective political tool and that it can produce a tremendous effect on the 'world's destiny'. This part of the film looks like clumsy advocacy for the 'spectacular' methods employed by Russian diplomats in the post-Crimean epoch and the heavy hand of the political commission from Lavrov's ministry is easily detectable here. However, despite a faithful reproduction of Cold War rhetoric, this series reveals the Soviet (and Russian) establishment's unrequited love for the West, hidden under the disguise of confrontation. The style and cut of Soviet diplomats' clothing, as well as their secret and not so secret sexual affairs with Westerners help to visualise this paradox.

Even more paradoxical is that while trying to act as real Westerners, the Soviet diplomats, in fact, act as imaginary devious capitalists lampooned by Soviet (and nowadays Russian) propaganda. At the same time, the series' authors present the adoption of dirty

media tricks by the protagonists as proof of the true modernisation of Soviet international politics, which is confirmed by the verdict that comes from a highly placed Party functionary, a hidden Stalinist, who wants to disband the Information-Analytical Group: "Your department was created to convince our enemies that we are like them."

In the second part of the series, however, diplomats almost entirely forget about foreign affairs and find themselves fully absorbed by domestic politics. The theme of betrayal and self-betrayal begins to dominate the series' plot manifested by almost all central characters. In the beginning of the series, Blaumane writes a political denunciation of Biriukov, while having an affair with the KGB overseer of the ministry; and in the twelfth episode she has sex with Biriukov when her husband, half-paralyzed after the unsuccessful trial of a new fighter plane, falls and dies at home. Biriukov's secret love, a German journalist Gabi Getze (Karolina Grushka), is shot dead during a sting operation that he arranged, and the young son of his adversary dies after a car collision, organised on Biriukov's request. Andri Muratov (Egor Koreshkov) learns that his wife has denounced him to the KGB out of jealousy. A naïve and idealistic Arkadii Golub' (Rinat Mukhametov) is forced to take a bribe for his assistance in getting a foreign passport for a fictional Soviet genetics, Stanislav Pimenov, who will defect during a conference in Princeton. When arrested, Golub admits under pressure that he did this on Biriukov's orders (which is a lie). Even Lenia Korneev (played by Artem Bystrov, known by Iurii Bykov's film *The Fool* (*Durak*, 2014)), who seems to be a perfect example of the true Soviet diplomat – he is a street-smart former sailor, with rough manners – appears to be a victim of CIA entrapment: he agreed to collaborate with the US while in Cuba, and now the Moscow-based CIA officer reestablishes his connection with the former sailor who is beginning his career in the Soviet foreign ministry.

Figure 1.5: Film still from three Soviet diplomats, three transgressors in Optimists *(2017–2021)*

Considering the importance of the theme of faithfulness to oneself and one's ideals as the antithesis to today's cynicism in all the TV series under discussion, such a treatment of this motif in *Optimists* looks like an aberration. However, it is not. Rather, it reveals

the true meaning of the alleged idealism of the past heroes in all these films. *Optimists* most openly, albeit in a caricature-like way, shows how the late Soviet 'deep state' functions by depicting a fictitious attempt of the anti-Khrushchev *coup d'état* in 1960. Until this moment, Biriukov devotedly serves the coup leader as his faithful lieutenant. However, when he learns that members in his group will be persecuted as traitors after the coup's success, Biriukov (with Blaumane's help) betrays his former mentor and protector by turning the same methods of media disinformation that they used on the international scene against the domestic conspirators.

Thanks to this mega-treason, all the film's protagonists, despite their own acts of betrayal, flourish in the film's finale and in the second season of the series released in 2021. Ruta Blaumane becomes the deputy minister of foreign affairs; Biriukov receives a post in the Central Committee; Arkadii Golub' is appointed as the head of the Information-Analytical Group instead of Biriukov; and Korneev ends up the chair of the KGB supervisor for the entire Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Notably, Muratov who did not betray anyone but was betrayed himself, is 'rewarded' in the least spectacular way – he is appointed to the Congo embassy where he departs together with his treacherous wife. In other words, after the defeat of old party apparatchiks, now they, young and transgressive, constitute the new deep state. Ignoring historical detail, the filmmakers make it clear that *this* deep state has assumed power after 2014.

From this perspective, the plot of *Optimists* – as well as other TV series of this kind – looks to be a rite of passage that the heroes need to undergo in order to join the new, post-Soviet, deep state. Alleged idealism helps the film's authors to justify the viewers' moral solidarity with these characters and their subsequent transformations. But it is the protagonists' ability to betray and to forget about their betrayals – i.e., to become cold and shameless cynics – that constitutes the critical condition for their 'admission' to the new order. In this respect, *Optimists* obviates the genealogy or contemporary power that is detectable in all of these series. Genealogy of power, according to Foucault (Rabinow 1998: 374), is based not on linearity but on ruptures and breakdowns – apparently, the moment of the betrayal of the former idealism imaginary constitutes the point of origin for the contemporary cultural, political and symbolic regime of power.

5. Retrotopia Unpacked

What is the new quality of nostalgia as manifested by these and similar TV series of the 2010s? One may define it with Zygmunt Bauman's term 'retrotopia' which he derives from Svetlana Boym's conceptualisation of nostalgia. He also cites Walter Benjamin's famous description of Paul Klee's the *Angelus Novus* (1920) as the Angel of History whose face is turned towards the past, in which he sees nothing but "a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage" and who is smashed by the storm blowing from Paradise: "The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris [from the past] before him grows skyward" (Benjamin 1968: 249). In Bauman's words, nowadays this Angel of History is changing direction, he is caught

> in the midst of a U-turn, his face turning from the past to the future, his wings being pushed backwards by the storm blowing this time from the imagined, anticipated and feared in advance Hell of the future towards the Paradise of the past […] The road to future looks uncannily as a trail of corruption and degeneration. Perhaps the road back, to the past, won't miss the chance of turning into a trail of cleansing from the damages committed by futures, whenever they turned into a present? (Bauman 2017: 2, 6)

In other words, in the retrotopian discourse the past has replaced the future. This concept resonates with the series under discussion. Both Mikhail Iampol'skii (2014) and Andrei Arkhangelskii (2013) suggest that these TV series attempt to cure the axiological disorientation experienced by post-Soviet people. The dominant ideological discourse simultaneously glorifies the Soviet period as the paradise lost and justifies neoliberal capitalism as the most effective economic order. On the contrary, the viewer of TV series about the Thaw and Stagnation finds the source of comfort in the realisation that the dreams of the miniseries' characters about foreign clothing and music, travel abroad and filming erotic scenes without the control of the Party has already been successfully accomplished in the present. Thus, what is indeed, albeit indirectly, glorified in retrotopias, is not the past but the present. Retrotopias, according to Bauman, offer "a firm ground thought to provide and hopefully guarantee an acceptable modicum of stability and therefore a satisfactory degree of self-assurance" (Bauman 2017: 8).

It would also be logical to explain the sense of post-Soviet confusion and identity splits with the contradictory or lost societal *telos*, which is also the reason for the absence of any captivating images of the future in contemporary Russian culture, both in social and literary discourses. Bauman's conceptualisation of retrotopia treats it as the modification of a traditional utopia. It was Northrop Frye, who famously compared the genre of utopia with the social contract offering the 'imaginative telos' to society:

> There are two social conceptions which can be expressed only in terms of myth. One is the social contract, which presents an account of the origins of society. The other is the utopia which presents the imaginative telos or end at which social life aims. […] The social contract, though a genuine myth which, in John Stuart Mill's phrase, passes a fiction off as a fact, is usually regarded as an integral part of social theory. The utopia, on the other hand, although its origin is such the same, belongs primarily to fiction. The reason is that the emphasis in the contract myth falls on the present facts of society which it is supposed to explain. And even to the extent that the contract myth is projected into the past, and so the myth preserves the gesture of making assertion that can be definitely verified or refuted. (Frye 1965: 323)

Not everything in this definition fits contemporary Russian retrotopias. First of all, they do not depict the utopian space and time of the past as rational, let alone faultless. On the contrary, they frequently emphasise negative aspects of the past, especially if these features seem not to be relevant for the present. Nevertheless, whether the heroes and heroines of the past fail or triumph in these miniseries, their performances create a utopian perspective on the past, not on the level of conscious goals but on the level of *affect*. This affect stems from the purely aesthetic aspects in the representation of the recent past, enhanced by the beauty of actors, elegance of settings and exoticism of clothing. These

films, unlike classical utopias, do not situate a societal telos in the past, nor do they seek to provide "yesterday's solutions to today's problems", to use Bauman's expression, because as we know, affect is pre-cognitive, yet, it creates an illusion of knowing and understanding and thus is deceptive.[4]

However, and this is the most vital aspect of retrotopias – *they blur the distinction between the social contract and utopia*, or rather, present the affective utopia as a new social contract. Much like the latter, retrotopias project their myth into the past thus creating an illusion of historical evidence. But most importantly, retrotopian emphasis also "falls on the present facts of society which it is supposed to explain". Probably not only explain – but mostly justify, although this can be said about the social contract as well. This is not a neo-traditionalist, but a neo-conservative social contract that paradoxically reaches out to select transgressive and rebellious elements[5] of late Soviet history in order to validate today's status quo. By this means it simultaneously justifies the state repression and pardons citizens' legal nihilism, advocates obedience and absolves rebellion.

The emergence of retrotopias as a new social contract can be explained from various perspectives: either by the disappointment in 'traditional' utopias of a radiant future – whether communist or capitalist alike – or the instability of all social contracts, to which the ruling regime seemed to subscribe. Nevertheless, they provide a comforting effect. These retrotopias symbolically protect the viewer from the dangerous future and offer an escape from the present. In deep resonance with Adorno's and Horkheimer's description of the culture industry: "It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 116).

Filmography

8 $\frac{1}{2}$, dir. Federico Fellini, Italy/France 1963.
A mysterious passion (*Tainstvennaia strast'*), dir. Vlad Furman, Russia 2016.
Babylon Berlin, dir. Tim Tykwer, Germany 2017–2023.
Little Birch Tree (*Berëzka*), dir. Aleksandr Baranov, Russia 2018.
D'Artagnan and Three Musketeers (*D'Artan'ian i tri mushketëra*), dir. Georgii Iungval'd-Khil'kevich, USSR 1978.
Black Marketeers (*Fartsa*), dir. Egor Baranov, Russia 2013.
Furtseva, dir. Sergei Popov, Russia 2011.
Gogol. The Beginning (*Gogol'. Nachalo*) dir. Egor Baranov Russia 2017.
Hotel "Rossiya" (*Gostinitsa Rossiia*), dir. Sergei Sentsov, Russia 2017.
How I Ended this Summer (*Kak ia provel ėtim letom*), dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii, Russia 2010.
Koktebel', dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii, Russia 2003.
Liudmila Gurchenko, dir. Sergei Aldonin, Russia 2016.

4 Cf. Massumi 2002 on affective knowledge.

5 As noted by Ilya Kukulin, "performances of transgression in Russia's public sphere could be seen as elements of a shared system of public expression, almost unconnected to any specific political ideology and/or social stratum. These performances constitute the horizon of expectations for the conformist majority" (Kukulin 2018: 229).

Mad Men, dir. Matthew Weiner, USA 2007–2015.
Margarita Nazarova, dir. Konstantin Maksimov, Russia 2016.
Optimists (*Optimisty*), dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii, Russia 2017–2021.
The Carnival Night (*Karnaval'naia noch'*), dir. Eldar Riazanov, USSR 1956.
The Dark Side of the Moon (*Obratnaia storona luny*), dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia 2012.
The Fool (*Durak*), dir. Iurii Bykov, Russia 2014.
The Red Queen (*Krasnaia Koroleva*), dir. Alëna Rainer, Russia/Ukraine 2015.
The Thaw (*Ottepel'*), dir. Valerii Todorovskii, Russia 2013.
Trial on the Road (*Proverka na dorogakh*), dir. Aleksei German, USSR 1971.
Trouble in Store (*Delo gastronoma no.1*, literary *The Case of Supermarket no. 1*), dir. Sergei Ashkenazi, Russia 2011.
Our Happy Tomorrow (*Nashe schastlivoe zavtra*), dir. Igor Kopylov, Russia 2016.

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