

Pornography and Post-Soviet Nostalgia:
An Analysis of Contemporary
Russian Cinema

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research objectives

This thesis sets out to examine the relationship between sex and nostalgia in contemporary Russian visual culture. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian society in the 1990s witnessed an influx of pornography, sexual discourse and commodities, according to which ‘the pervasiveness of graphic sexual content in film, television, and popular fiction after years of puritanism suggested a culture “pornographized” nearly to saturation’ (Borenstein 2008, 54). Pornographic magazines, nude women in advertising and even television shows discussing sexual activity became normalised, all of which is in sharp contrast to the situation post-2000, which has experienced a return to more traditional gender roles and a decrease verging on disappearance of sexual discourse in society. In addition, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen a growing tendency to turn to the Soviet Union as a source for new material, both in political and cultural spheres, and the 1990s and 2000s are thus seen as entirely disparate entities, with little overlap between the two (Kalinina 2014).

It was during my research into the topic of sexual discourse in Russia that I encountered the work of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who made an explicit link and comparison between the two phenomena that I was exploring – pornography and nostalgia. He proposed that in terms of subject-object-gaze, nostalgia is ‘the opposite pole of pornography’, and it is this concept of a counter relationship between sex and nostalgia that this study will go on to discuss (Žižek 1989, 39). Whilst Žižek’s theory focused on physical filming techniques and the relationship between the subject and the object of desire in cinema, this thesis will use the hypothesis as a starting point and apply it more broadly to explore the relationship between sex and post-Soviet nostalgia both in terms of content and filming techniques in modern Russian cinema. Through close analysis of three case studies taken from 2000 onwards – two films and one television programme – and drawing on the background literature, the argument that this study will put forward is that the pornographic tendencies of the 1990s that were deemed to have vanished following the accession of Putin to power are far from having been eliminated. Instead, this thesis will contend that sex has not only remained present, but it has also assumed new functions beyond simply attracting an audience in a manner superfluous to the plot. In Russian cinema, whilst in some cases sex scenes remain a way of attracting attention with the female form, more often than not there is a deeper symbolism attached tying in nationalism, questions of East versus West and undermining the now infamous statement that there was no sex in the Soviet Union¹, and consequently none in post-Soviet Russia (Borenstein 2008). Through close analysis, I shall therefore seek to demonstrate that at least in terms of sexual discourse and post-Soviet nostalgia, more nuanced conclusions can be reached, instead of the contrived, rigid distinction so often made between the 1990s and the 2000s.

¹ In 1987, a Soviet woman on a television show proudly exclaimed that ‘We have no sex!’, a claim that was both ridiculed and seen as representative of the attitude towards sex and sexual discourse in the USSR (Borenstein 2008, 28).

1.2 Importance of the research

This study was borne predominantly out of the dearth of literature on the topic of pornography and sexual discourse, especially with regards to Russia and the Soviet Union. Whilst the question of post-Soviet nostalgia has received a great deal of attention, the same cannot be said of pornography, which remains a neglected topic. Furthermore, what does exist is written predominantly from a Western feminist perspective and is thus less applicable to the Russian context. A greater understanding of the role that sex plays in popular culture and society can only be beneficial in a country where until the late 1980s sex was believed to exist exclusively for a reproductive purpose. In addition, what little discussion of pornography there is within Russia too often limits itself to the boundaries of the first post-Soviet decade. This perspective treats the phenomenon as a foreign, Western concept that invaded Russia and led to moral degradation, materialism and a collective deterioration of society, to name but a few so-called consequences. The palpable return to a more traditional society that has occurred since the turn of the century has seen the question of sex largely silenced. This study aims to address this imbalance and to challenge the assertion that the sexual in Russia is limited to the 1990s.

Furthermore, the choice of film as the medium for analysis is seen as a beneficial one. In Russia in particular, cinema has historically been placed on a pedestal and viewed as having a significant capacity to communicate the details of a specific time period and its nuances. As such, much has been written over the last two decades on the rise of nationalism, patriotism and nostalgia within the Russian film industry. This study aims to contribute to said literature and broaden the discussion on contemporary visual culture and its symbolism.

1.3 Research scope and methodology

In order to investigate the relationship between and existence of sex and nostalgia in contemporary Russian visual culture, this study focuses on a small number of case studies in order to allow for a sufficiently detailed analysis. The three works that have been chosen, in chronological order, are:

- *The Envy of Gods* [Зависть Богов] – directed by Vladimir Menshov, 2000
- *The Vanished Empire* [Исчезнувшая Империя] – directed by Karen Shakhnazarov, 2008
- *The Thaw* [Оттепель] – directed by Valery Todorovsky, 2013

Using media and popular culture as tools for societal analysis and commentary is now an established technique and I am operating under the assumption that in today's society, the media can be as much of a tool for understanding as empirical evidence. The choice of studying cinema post-2000 was a logical one as the turn of the century is widely accepted as the turning point in post-Soviet Russian politics and culture, moving sharply away from the chaos of the 1990s. In addition, the 2000s have witnessed a significant rise in post-Soviet nostalgia, especially within popular culture (Kalinina 2014, 2017; Piccolo 2015). These three works were chosen after consulting a wide range of sources based on their potential for making valuable case studies. Each film depicts a different decade and between them cover the 1960s, 70s and 80s. All three storylines are set in Moscow and the characters by and large represent the cultural elite. To differing extents, each film explores a sexual relationship against

the backdrop of a cinematic return to the Soviet era. Each film shall be analysed in turn, discussing the depiction of nostalgia, sex, and the extent to which these do or do not interact with one another.

For the purposes of this study I have extended my resources beyond the limits of purely academic writing and a range of sources and websites that would not traditionally be considered as academic have been consulted. In particular, this includes websites such as *KinoKultura* and *Kino-Teatr*, both of which feature interviews, reviews and audience responses to a wide range of Russian films. This allows for a greater understanding of the topic and the ways in which the average spectator interacts with and interprets a specific film. The limitations of such a study lie in the somewhat inherent subjectivity found in film analysis, as a portion of said analysis relies on the reviewer's personal interpretation. However, I employ formal film analysis, focusing on the mise-en-scène, composition of shots, editing, the score, and the narrative in order to limit potential subjectivity. Through tying in literature on the topics, exploring chat room discussions, and considering each film within the political, cultural and social context of both the time in which it was produced and the time period that it seeks to depict, I attempt to provide as objective a study as possible.

1.4 Structure

The first part of this thesis provides an overview of the key literature that exists on the two major topics discussed, the nostalgic and the pornographic, with a particular focus on post-Soviet nostalgia as a subcategory of the former. The literature review will conclude with an explanation and analysis of the key text that triggered this study, Slavoj Žižek's 1989 piece *Looking Awry*, in which he explores the relationship between pornography and nostalgia in cinema.

The main body of the thesis consists of three distinct case studies which will be used to explore, test and analyse the relationship between sex and nostalgia in contemporary Russian popular culture. I have placed these three case studies on a spectrum that I designed, starting with limited to no interaction between the two phenomena – sex and post-Soviet nostalgia – and transitioning towards the other end of the spectrum where sex and nostalgia co-exist in what is effectively a complementary relationship. Lastly, the final chapter will briefly recapitulate the findings of this study, the main points to be taken away from it and present an argument for further research and potential paths that this could take.

2. Literature Review

Before I proceed with the film analysis that will constitute the most significant component of this thesis, I will first give a brief overview of the literature on the topic of post-Soviet nostalgia, followed by discourse on pornography and concluding with an explanation of Slavoj Žižek's 1989 hypothesis on the relationship between the two phenomena. This is necessary in order to fully understand the contextual background to the ensuing film analysis.

2.1 Post-Soviet nostalgia

There is no lack of scholarship on the topic of nostalgia, and in recent decades discussion on the sub-category of post-Soviet nostalgia has proven prolific. The term was initially coined by a Swiss physician in the seventeenth century to describe a curable disease that afflicted soldiers serving abroad. It consequently transitioned into a romantic sentiment during the Enlightenment, becoming more widespread with the shock of industrialisation and modernisation, up to the twenty-first century and what we now view as the incurable modern affliction (Davis 1979; Lasch 1984; Boym 2001; Kalinina 2014). Given the wide-spread consensus on the definition of nostalgia offered by Svetlana Boym, I take this as a basis, according to which 'nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy' (Boym 2001, xiii). In the Russian context, Post-Soviet nostalgia is 'generally understood as a sentimental longing for the Soviet past' (Kalinina 2014, 3), which, along with the German *Ostalgie* for the former German Democratic Republic and *Yugo-Nostalgia* for the former Yugoslavia, has flourished in recent decades and manifested itself in a range of forms. Nowadays in Russia, the word nostalgia appears tarnished with negative connotations, with any reference or evocation of the Soviet Union doomed to be labelled nostalgic (Kalinina 2014, 19). The following paragraphs will summarise the main causes of nostalgia, the forms that it takes, and what it attempts to achieve.

Post-Soviet nostalgia in the mid to late 1990s was sometimes viewed as triggered by dissatisfaction with Yeltsin and his political regime (Nikitin 2011; Kalinina 2014, 231); however, one of the most endorsed theories contends that nostalgia occurs in response to something traumatic (Davis 1979; Boym 2001; Kalinina 2014, 2017; Piccolo 2015, 255). With regards to Russia, it is interesting that this trauma is not necessarily the collapse of the Soviet Union, but alternatively the materialism, obscene wealth, and lack of spirituality that is deemed to have developed during the 1990s, to which nostalgia functioned as an antidote, creating a sense of stability in times of change (Oushakine 2007, 452; Kalinina 2014). However, this theory is not without its critics, Lev Gudkov, the director of the Levada Centre – which consistently carries out surveys on nostalgia for the USSR – asserts that the 1990s and the transition were dominated not by discontinuity and trauma, but rather by the continuity to be found in the essence of the Soviet and now post-Soviet person. According to Gudkov's logic, nostalgia is not a response to trauma, but rather the Soviet person yearning for the home they no longer have (Nikitin 2011). Another scholar, Christopher Lasch, discusses the irony in employing nostalgia in the search for stability in a period of change, given that 'a sense of continuity is exactly what nostalgia discourages' (Lasch 1984, 69). Crucially, no matter the trigger, nostalgia can only flourish when the object of its attention is irretrievably lost, when the past we are looking back on is safeguarded by a sense of distance (Lasch 1984; Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004; Nikitin 2011; Boele 2011).

Gradually becoming more prominent and entering mainstream popular culture from the mid 1990s onwards, post-Soviet nostalgia takes on a number of forms. Whilst it should be cautioned against automatically reading political meaning into any depiction of the USSR, even when the nostalgic subject asserts that it is not so, politics are indeed at work, whether by those who are creating, labelling, or interpreting it (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004). The aforementioned Svetlana Boym made a distinction between 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia. According to her, the former is viewed in a more positive light as it focuses on remembrance from a distance and yearning on a personal, individual or cultural level (Boym 2001). In comparison, the latter is a negative phenomenon, and often does not view itself as nostalgic, but is the basis of much of modern-day patriotism, reconstructing and rebuilding the past in the present (Boym 2001). However, this categorisation has been criticised for being too binary and more nuanced classifications are needed. Yearly Levada Centre polls support the statement that nostalgia for the Soviet Union is largely on the rise², but there are disagreements over whether reflective nostalgia is being displaced by a restorative one, or whether nostalgia is becoming more personal and reflective (Nikitin 2011; Kalinina 2014). What is clear is that depictions of the USSR concentrate overwhelmingly on the Brezhnev period, or are related to childhood and youth, with the Stalin period remaining largely taboo (Yurchak 2005; Nikitin 2011; Boele 2011).

One of the most common articulations of nostalgia is the glamourisation or 'lakirovka' of reality, which focuses exclusively on the positives and often on Russia's former military prowess and power (Piccolo 2015, 255; Kalinina 2017). However, in contrast to this, a form that can be referred to as dark nostalgia has been appearing, constituting a positive recoding of the negatives. By this logic, human beings have the capacity to remove negative connotations from a specific memory and reconstruct an unpleasant period into one filled with positivity, termed 'nostalgia's muting of the negative' (Davis 1979, 37). Alternatively, issues such as food shortages and long supermarket queues are seen in a positive light as a reaction to the consumerist and immoral mentality of the 1990s, although issues of censorship and repression are still sidestepped (Nikitin 2011). The question of how the post-Soviet person can yearn for the negatives or rather retain such a positive association with the USSR is one that the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak addresses in his comprehensive study on the last Soviet generation and the model of Soviet socialism at this time. Yurchak highlights how nostalgia is formed and interpreted differently by each generation and explains how 'although the system's collapse had been unimaginable before it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened' (Yurchak 2005, 1). Through a changing discursive regime and disassociation of western objects from their literal western connotations, for example, a distinction was formed between the Soviet Union as a political and ideological entity and the human interactions and relationships that functioned within it. Post-Soviet nostalgia therefore involves a longing for the human values that constituted people's daily reality under socialism (Yurchak 2005, 1). Avoiding any overtly positive or negative overtones, some argue that we are witnessing a new form of nostalgia which lacks temporal specificity and rather places the Soviet Union within the continuous Russian 'heterogeneous cultural legacy' (Kalinin 2011, 157). Ultimately, a key problem across all forms of nostalgia is that it simplifies and diminishes what was a complex and highly traumatic history into a ready-packaged product that is easily relatable to a contemporary audience (Lasch 1984, 69; Oushakine 2007, 452; Kalinina 2017, 286).

² The Levada Centre carries out annual surveys on the topic of nostalgia for the USSR, according to which they calculate a 'Nostalgia Index for the USSR' (<https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/12/25/nostalgia-for-the-ussr/>)

The results of nostalgia are varied, but there is a consensus among scholars that the phenomenon represents a powerful tool for the creation and bolstering of a sense of community, and by extension of local and national identities (Davis 1979; Boym 2001; Yurchak 2005; Volcic 2007; Boele 2011; Kalinina 2014, 2017), although there is also a danger seen in using nostalgia in the creation of collective identities (Boym 2001; Kalinina 2014). Nostalgia's capacity to form collective identities is further emphasised by the fact that it is often generation bound (Davis 1979; Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004; Yurchak 2005; Volcic 2007; Boele 2011; Kalinina 2014). This sense of belonging links to a more modern result of post-Soviet nostalgia, and one that is exploited by politicians and others alike. This exploitation revolves around a sense of patriotism and the formation of a new Russian national idea, something quite necessary following the collapse of the Soviet Union and sudden lack of national identity with which Russians were faced. A selective image of the Soviet past, in which negative symbols are removed and the triumphs are highlighted, is exploited to inspire a sense of pride and patriotism. Post-Soviet nostalgia thus becomes an effective nation-building tool (Kalinin 2011; Kalinina 2014, 2017; Malinova 2015). Furthermore, the past can be used not only to manipulate and legitimise the incumbent political regime (Kalinin 2011; Kalinina 2017, 303), but in a more problematic sense, a false or selective image of the past can also provide 'blueprints for the present' (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004, 513). The above testifies to the difficulty of separating the personal from the political, no matter the intention, and nostalgia has been described as a 'double edged sword', given that it is seen as 'an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool' (Boym 2001, 58). The ease with which post-Soviet nostalgia has been co-opted for political purposes contributes to the negative connotations that the term has acquired.

2.2 Pornography

In comparison to post-Soviet nostalgia, scholarship on the topic of pornography is sorely lacking. What little there is stems predominantly from Western scholars and is dominated by feminist discourse (Levitt 1999a, 6), which typically views pornography in a highly negative light, as 'an industry that mass produces sexual intrusion on, access to, possession and use of women by and for men for profit' (MacKinnon 1989, 195). The first stumbling block in studies of pornography is the lack of consensus on a definition (Levitt 1999a, 8; Goldschmidt 1999a; Goscilo 1999, 553; Lalo 2012, 92). Its etymological roots lie in the Greek 'porne', which 'denotes a woman who is bought as a sexual commodity' (Rimmel 1999, 642), although interpretations differ between countries, cultures and languages. The most widely quoted definition is that offered by Lynn Hunt, who describes it as 'the explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practices with the aim of arousing sexual feelings' (Hunt 1993, 10). However, this definition is more applicable to the Western context, as the history, practice and scholarship on pornography in Russia reveals a different perception. The word *pornografiia* carries different connotations to the English *pornography*, with the former being narrower in meaning and more 'pictorial rather than verbal' (Levitt 1999a, 8). Russian legislation across tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet times has failed to offer a definition. Even the supposedly extensive 1991 study by G. S. Novopolin – *The Pornographic Element in Russian Literature* – failed to define what exactly that pornographic element was, assuming almost any reference to love as pornographic (Naiman 1997, 55). One of the most oft-quoted definitions in Russia today dates from 1960 by an unknown author commenting on the Criminal Code, who interpreted pornographic work as 'crudely naturalistic, obscene, cynically portraying sexual life, [and] attempting as their goal the unhealthy stimulation of sexual feelings'

(Goldschmidt 1999a, 508). The question of definition is one that is unlikely to be resolved in the near future.

In terms of Western Europe, the first modern source of pornography is widely cited as the Italian sixteenth-century writer Pietro Aretino (Hunt 1993, 24), although the emergence of pornography is tied to the emergence of modern culture and movements such as the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Renaissance. At the point of its emergence and up until the mid- to late eighteenth century, pornography tended to carry a social or political function. From the 1790s onwards, political connotations began to fade into the background as commercial pornography took over (Hunt 1993). The history of pornography in Russia is vastly different, with the first Russian pornographer, believed to be Ivan Barkov, not appearing until the eighteenth century. His works were far removed from what we would consider pornography today, yet his legacy is impressive – his name became synonymous with illicit print and the word *barkovschina* is still employed in Russia today (Hunt 1993, 24; Farrell 1999, 17; Levitt 1999b, 220).

One of the reasons that this thesis focuses on sex and pornography as symbolic phenomena in Russian popular culture is because of their links to politics. The underlying belief is that pornography was a threat to the ruling authority. In the Russian context this idea has been present across Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary times, and has been seen as a threat primarily because it often functions outside the control of the authorities and is therefore subversive (Hunt 1993; Naiman 1997; Goldschmidt 1999a, 1999b; Avgerinos 2006; Borenstein 2008). Similarly, whether or not there was a direct causal link between subversion and pornography, a link did indeed exist between pornography and political reaction, with the former often appearing after a period of unrest. This could be seen in Russia after the 1905 Revolution, following the collapse of the USSR, with Alexander III in the 1880s and in France during the Directory and following the 1848 French Revolt, at which points a proliferation of sexual material appeared (Naiman 1997, 53; Boele 1999, 315; Avgerinos 2006; Goldschmidt 1999b; Borenstein 2008). On the side of the authorities, the vagueness of the law in both the Soviet Union and today's Russia, with its failure to define pornography, has allowed the state to exploit the law and arrest those who are seen as a threat by levelling pornography charges against them. In this respect, contemporary Russia's strategies for dealing with pornography have taken on totalitarian tendencies (Goldschmidt 1999a). It is for these reasons that pornography has historically come to be associated with democracy and liberalism, especially during the USSR when it became linked to freedom of speech and Western values (Hunt 1993; Borenstein 2008). However, this correlation did not last long and in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the love affair between pornography and liberalism slowly transformed into one between pornography and nationalism instead (Borenstein 2008).

This relationship between nationalism and pornography continues the trend of manipulating pornography into a form of social or political commentary, and one scholar in particular has taken it further to argue that 'in Russia, pornography is an idea' (Borenstein 2008, 53). Eliot Borenstein has written extensively on sex in post-Soviet Russia and the argument that pervades these texts is 'the conflation of the sexual and the national' (2008, 75). According to his logic, the national humiliation and economic woes of the modern-day Russian Federation are played out through pornography, something that has become apparent in Russian men's magazines such as *Andrei* (Borenstein 1999, 2008). However, Borenstein's work is not without its critics and he has been accused of being too

enchanted by the topic of his studies and therefore unable to remain objective (Lalo 2012, 93). According to this logic, Russian pornography does not have its own category of meaning and can be seen as similar to its Western counterpart in both its function and associations (Goldschmidt 1999b, 323; Lalo 2012, 93). Lastly, one symbolic function that is generally accepted is the link between post-Soviet pornography and embattled masculinity. Faced with the collapse of the state and an uncertain national identity, the Russian man is seen as have been stripped of his power. This idea has manifested itself in contemporary Russian pornography, a commodity which itself is dominated by the West, further reducing Russia's status (Rimmel 1999, 639; Borenstein 1999, 2008).

From the above, it becomes clear that the question of pornography is far from a simple one, and we should be careful when applying Western literature on the topic to the Russian context.

2.3 Slavoj Žižek's *Looking Awry*

As mentioned in the introduction, the text that unites these two concepts – nostalgia and pornography – is a 1989 piece titled *Looking Awry*, written by the Slovenian continental philosopher Slavoj Žižek. As a philosopher, he has proven both controversial and popular, tackling the far right and left, and has devoted a significant amount of his work to studies on pornography. *Looking Awry* opens with metaphors and Shakespeare, and by drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, its key focus is on the relationship between the subject and the object of desire. Žižek's first argument claims that by looking at the object of desire directly, the object appears either unclear or non-existent to us. It is only by looking at the object through our subjective, side-on gaze, that we see the object of desire in its true, clear form (Žižek 1989, 34). Crucially, the case study that he used to prove this was pornography, 'the genre supposed to "show everything," to hide nothing, to register "all" with an objective camera and offer it to our view' in a straight-on fashion (Žižek 1989, 35). However, it is precisely in pornography that the view is turned the other way around, and not only is the object of desire not revealed to the subject by looking directly at it, but the subject-object dynamic is reversed. Žižek contends that 'the real subjects are the actors on the screen trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators, are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze' (Žižek 1989, 37). Consequently, in order to obtain the true gaze of the subject onto the object of desire, we must turn to nostalgia and Žižek's principal hypothesis, and a key trigger for the research of this thesis, is as follows:

'In pornography, the gaze qua object falls thus onto the subject-spectator, causing an effect of depressing desublimation. Which is why, to extract the gaze-object in its pure, formal status, we have to turn to the opposite pole of pornography: nostalgia' (Žižek 1989, 39).

With this statement, the philosopher has drawn a comparison and direct link between pornography and nostalgia. His consequent discussion draws on American *film noir* of the 1940s and the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock to support his argument. The key points are that precisely through a sense of distance and looking at the action from aside – from a different time to which a piece was created or that which it depicts, and aware of said distance – the modern spectator is fascinated by the object and amused by the naivety of it (Žižek 1989). As such, it is only in nostalgia that we are able to extract the gaze of the subject onto the object of desire in its pure form.

This study will by no means accept Žižek's hypothesis as fact; however, I will use the concept of a relationship between nostalgia and pornography as the base framework against which the ensuing case studies will be analysed.

3. The Vanished Empire [Исчезнувшая Империя] – Karen Shakhnazarov (2008)

3.1 Introduction

The first case study relates to Karen Shakhnazarov's 2008 film, *The Vanished Empire* [Исчезнувшая Империя], the film that most accurately exemplifies the theory being tested in this thesis. In fact, Lilya Kaganovsky, a professor of Slavic comparative literature and cinema studies, explicitly made the link between Shakhnazarov's film and Žižek's theory in her review of the film, a film which has been broadly criticised for its shamelessly rose-tinted and nostalgic take on life in the Soviet Union. Shakhnazarov was actually forced to defend his perspective by asserting that the film 'is a memoir of my youth. Today I wonder at the fact that back then we fell in love, got married, and divorced, and it did not occur to us that the country in which we were living was already condemned and would soon vanish from the world map, that our life was going on against the background of global historic events' (Shakhnazarov quoted in Kaganovsky 2008). The below synopsis will summarise the plot, but it is interesting that the three young male protagonists epitomise what has been described as 'the spectrum of possibility of the "last Soviet generation"' (Kaganovsky 2008). Namely, while Kostya is Western looking to an almost narrow-minded extent, Stepan is more than comfortable following the Communist Party line within the borders of the Soviet Union, and Sergey represents the middle ground – coming from the intelligentsia, he is Western looking in his materialism but is kept sufficiently amused in the USSR by the beautiful girls around him (Kaganovsky 2008). It is the combination of these factors, Shakhnazarov's take on the era, which caters to what I will refer to as a guilt-free form of nostalgia, and the depiction of the female characters, that make *The Vanished Empire* a relevant case study for this thesis.

One of the most interesting features of the film is its initially contradictory nature, which is later revealed to be quite the opposite. The world that Shakhnazarov has directed is one in which American rock and roll and Wrangler jeans bought on the black market coexist effortlessly with compulsory classes on Communist Party history and portraits of Lenin on the lecture room wall. The director himself was challenged at a press conference about whether 'slogans such as "Slava KPSS", rock groups like "The Rolling Stones", and Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky – all of which have equal statuses in the film – did not at one time exist in some kind of antipathy to each other, or belong to different universes. "They didn't," answered the director' (Kaganovsky 2008). Such a statement is in line with the work of Alexei Yurchak, whose study discusses the seemingly paradoxical idea that 'although the system's collapse had been unimaginable before it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened' (Yurchak 2005, 1). Both Shakhnazarov and Yurchak would argue that these seemingly paradoxical symbols, ideas, and ways of life were far from contradictory, and we should pay more attention to the distinction between an object itself and the meaning associated with it in order to understand this. Taking one common idea from the 1970s as an example, whilst the state criticised the abundance of Western clothing worn by the Soviet youth, citing it as a sign of consumerism or a subtle form of resistance, the reality was far removed from this. Instead, items such as a pair of Wrangler jeans – as featured in the film – symbolised not a desire to flee to the West, but rather their origin allowed the wearer to imagine a place removed from reality, an imaginary space full of possibility (Yurchak 2005, 197). It is thus 'the profound disconnectedness of these symbols from the literal meanings they had in the Western context' that enabled Western commodities to coexist in a harmonious manner with Soviet cultural and ideological symbols, as Shakhnazarov displays in the film (Yurchak 2005, 197). The

following section will summarise the plot, and consequently analyse *The Vanished Empire* with regards to post-Soviet nostalgia, the way in which this is communicated to the spectator, and the depiction (or rather lack) of sex and its connection to Russianness as a concept.

3.2 Synopsis

Set in Moscow in the autumn and winter of 1973 to 1974, the film follows the lives of Moscow's golden youth [золотая молодежь], the privileged young elite of Moscow who enjoyed parties, music, culture, and considered themselves dissidents simply for owning a copy of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Our protagonist is Sergey, a first-year student and grandson of a well-known Soviet archaeologist, navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood. Living with his single mother, younger brother, and grandfather, Sergey acts as though free from any sense of responsibility, selling his grandfather's books in order to afford Western jeans and rock and roll records on the black market. He is accompanied by his two closest friends, the party-loving Kostya – the son of a diplomat and intent on partying his way through life and escaping the USSR – and Stepan, the conventionally well-behaved young Soviet citizen. A love triangle dominates much of the plot, with Sergey early on falling for the beautiful Lyuda, and a charming, young romance follows. However, this is derailed with the arrival of Katya, a new student who immediately catches Sergey's attention, and leads Stepan to pursue Lyuda in his absence. Sergey's attitude is dramatically altered following the death of his mother and the discovery that Lyuda is pregnant with Stepan's child. Searching for clarity, Sergey goes on a journey to Khorezm, the City of the Winds, a remote archaeological site that his grandfather discovered in the desert of Uzbekistan. The life cycle depicted concludes with a coda in which we jump thirty years into the future to post-Communist Russia at Moscow's airport, and discover the fate that awaited the three men. Filmed entirely from Sergey's perspective, the western-looking Kostya is revealed to have died from alcoholism, whilst Stepan has divorced Lyuda and is living unhappily in Finland. The only success story amongst the three is Sergey, who studied Eastern languages and is now a translator from Farsi, thereby strengthening his connection to his ancestors and rejecting the Western commodities that he previously revered.

3.3 A product of post-Soviet nostalgia

The film is unquestionably a product of post-Soviet nostalgia. A major contributing factor to this and one of the key attractions and simultaneous flaws of the piece is its near exclusive focus on youth and innocence, which subsequently leads to a neglect of the multitude of horrors of the Soviet system. The concept of innocence is one that is often associated with the Soviet Union, although this association is only made possible with the gift of hindsight. In this instance, I am interpreting innocence to be a lack of experience and knowledge, which in turns encourages us to forgive certain actions that we otherwise might not. Therefore, whilst during the 1970s these characters would not have been considered innocent in this sense of the word, nowadays when the modern spectator looks back at them from a comfortable distance, the characters do indeed appear innocent in their lack of knowledge of the wider world and limited understanding of certain concepts. For example, in the opening scene Sergey is flirting with a girl at his apartment and proudly describes himself as a dissident. This in itself is telling, he cannot be considered a dissident simply for not paying attention in lectures or for buying Western clothing on the black market. Yet this is precisely his attitude and one that I categorise as an innocent one, implying a lack of understanding of what being a dissident

truly means and requires. One scholar who has written about the concept of innocence in relation to the Soviet Union is Alexei Yurchak, whose now commonly cited quote from a former Soviet citizen describes how ‘the “crash of Communism” was also, in retrospect, the crash of something very personal, innocent, and full of hope, of the “passionate sincerity and genuineness” that marked childhood and youth’ (Yurchak 2005, 8). It is precisely this sense of an innocent world that Shakhnazarov has constructed in *The Vanished Empire*. Not only do the characters appear innocent in terms of their personal knowledge and attitude, but the director’s neglect of the negative aspects of the Soviet Union further enhances this sense of ignorance and lack of knowledge, encouraging us to indulge in what can be termed guilt-free nostalgia.

I have chosen the term guilt-free nostalgia to describe how the spectator is encouraged to ‘indulge in our desire to wallow in the past, our nostalgia for the lost world not only of our youth, but of the whole country, a place that disappeared from world maps on or around 1991’ (Kaganovsky 2008). Through the aesthetically attractive depiction of early 1970s Moscow and its fashion, music and quirks, Shakhnazarov undeniably encourages us to revel in the images in front of us. However, I term this guilt-free as there are two aspects to it that attempt to remove any political connotations. The first method of doing this is to focus on youth, a technique highlighted by Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko who apply the idea predominantly to childhood, although I would argue that it is equally as applicable to one’s teenage years. For example, ‘projecting nostalgia into childhood makes it possible to evade its political implications by tying it to the period when perception is by definition pre-political’ (2004, 510). By focusing the story on Sergey and his friends in their adolescent years, it naturally becomes more difficult to focus on the politics associated with the 1970s, given how little attention to politics the characters themselves appear to give at this stage in their lives. Secondly, whilst we are encouraged to indulge in nostalgia, it is done so from a suitable distance for it not to be considered detrimental, a feature I assert is key to reflective nostalgia. As discussed in the literature review, nostalgia is ‘a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship’ (Boym 2001, xiii). *The Vanished Empire* delights in nostalgia as a concept of fantasy and from a long-distance point of view. For example, when Sergey is showing off his newly purchased Wrangler jeans to Stepan, his excitement, whilst comprehensible to us as we have an understanding of the context, is endearing more than anything. Safe in our twenty-first century knowledge and the ease of acquiring such jeans nowadays, we view his excitement in a naïve and almost patronising way. Nostalgia of this nature is aware enough of itself and the distance between reality and the action it is portraying that it would be almost impossible to argue that this film in any way attempts to reintroduce the Soviet past into contemporary Russia. The combination of the above contributes to an indulgence in a form of guilt-free nostalgia.

3.4 Mise-en-scène

Continuing with the sense of distance between the viewer and the action, the mise-en-scène is crucial to its establishment. As Lilya Kaganovsky has pointed out, ‘Shakhnazarov tries to capture precisely this feeling of the personal, innocent, hopeful, and sincere – but what he produces instead is a simulacrum, a copy without an original’ (Kaganovsky 2008). What the reviewer is referring to is the filming style and mise-en-scène of the piece. The period details are excessive, the colour is overly saturated and the clothes are too perfectly chosen. This is made clear from the opening scene, as the three boys – Kostya, Stepan and Sergey – entertain two girls in Sergey’s dimly lit candle-filled apartment, the

kometa record player playing the Archies 1969 hit song *Sugar, Sugar*. The two girls are dressed in the height of fashion at the time. The striking blonde is in wide leg trousers and a cowl neck blouse, her hair slightly slicked back, wearing matte white stud earrings and black winged eyeliner (Shakhnazarov 2008, 0:36). Costume choices are but one small part of the era's embellishments, the rest entails the soundtrack, the furniture and the cars – as exemplified by Kostya and Sergey's excitement at the former's new Tatra car, a Czechoslovakian car manufacturer which at times worked directly under the control of the Communist Party. All of these aspects contribute to the overall visual impression created by Shakhnazarov. The overwhelming attention to detail demonstrated here means that we are 'painfully aware' that the events are being staged with us in mind (Kaganovsky 2008). This awareness increases the sense of distance described above and contributes to the fantasy idea of nostalgia.

The effect of such a *mise-en-scène* is precisely the phenomenon that Žižek described in *Looking Awry*. As outlined in the literature review, at its base, pornography as a cinematic genre is 'supposed to "show everything," to hide nothing, to register "all" with an objective camera and offer it to our view' (Žižek 1989, 35), the key word here being 'objective'. In contrast to this, the nostalgic world excruciatingly constructed in *The Vanished Empire* is not only highly subjective – as evidenced by the oversight of many negative aspects of the Soviet Union during this period – but is also filmed from such a distance that 'we have a gaze that is looking away, toward some distant and removed past, a past that is coded as its own hermetically sealed and private world that *does not* require our direct participation' (Kaganovsky 2008). I am hesitant to accept that the idea of distance and indirect participation is applicable to all forms of post-Soviet nostalgia in modern popular culture, but I would assert that in this case it is indeed relevant. After all, when watching *The Vanished Empire*, it is impossible not to be aware that the events unfolding before your eyes have been staged perfectly for your own entertainment, safe in the knowledge that the world depicted no longer exists and cannot return into existence.

3.5 The (non-)sexualisation of the female characters

Following on from this, whilst it is true that the nostalgic aspects of the film discussed above bestow a sense of innocence and purity amongst the youth of the Soviet 1970s, the sexualisation of certain female characters is in stark contrast to this and the film suggests that sexual morals were looser than the official Party line would have you believe. According to Party rhetoric, prostitution did not exist ('its causes – private property and female poverty – had been eradicated) and sex, similarly, was a taboo topic (Attwood 1996, 114). The official line is not seen as representative of reality, and the opening scene shows our three male protagonists attempting to seduce two girls whom they are hosting in Sergey's apartment. Without recounting the entire scene, both girls are quickly wooed by Kostya and Sergey, with one of the girls happily moving from kissing Sergey one minute to kissing Stepan the next. The other girl is the target of Kostya, who persistently tries to get her to go into the bedroom with him, and whilst she initially says no with some authority, it does not take long before she is giggling and pulled into the bedroom with him (Shakhnazarov 2008, 1:44). Sexual values, at least amongst Soviet youth, are depicted as liberal from the outset of the film, something that goes distinctly against the official line.

The sexualisation and objectification of the female characters is exacerbated with the arrival of Katya, a new first year student who immediately catches Sergey's eye. Dressed in a matching brown suede

mini skirt and jacket, heeled boots, her long bare legs on display and her blonde hair tied in two loose ponytails, she is reminiscent of a sexualised cowgirl and is the opposite of Lyuda. Her main scene with Sergey occurs shortly after they first meet, when during a lecture and much to the amusement of the rest of the student body, the two sneak under their seats and lie horizontal on the stairs. All that is visible to us is the lower half of their legs, Katya's bare, as they squirm and giggle, as if in pleasure (Shakhnazarov 2008, 42:42). In contrast to this, it is interesting to note that at no point in the film is Lyuda, the quintessential Russian beauty and target of both Sergey and Stepan's affection, sexualised. Despite the fact that Lyuda is the one who ends up pregnant, we see no hint of a sex scene, no sexualised moments between her and Stepan, and the few kisses she shares on screen with Sergey are tinged with the innocence of youth. Lyuda wears less make up than the other female characters, with just a hint of eyeliner on her top lid and pale pink lips, her skirt hemlines are consistently longer than most, and her and Sergey's first date is as harmless as can be. At the cinema she pulls her hand away from his as if nervous, at her apartment afterwards she stands awkwardly as he looks around the bookcase, and despite an obvious moment when they could have done so, their first kiss is not until much later. A comic moment comes when Kostya suggests Sergey gives Lyuda a pornographic magazine for her birthday, proudly whipping out an erotic magazine of evidently Western origin with full-frontal nudity on clear display. Whilst both Sergey and the spectator may laugh at his stupidity, this is the sole moment in the film where sexualised discourse occurs in relation to Lyuda, a scene in which she is not even present. The idea is quickly shot down and this remains the closest Lyuda comes to being subjected to overt sexualisation.

3.6 The 'mystical' West and the self-other parameter

Lyuda is undeniably symbolic of the idea of an authentic Russian beauty; however, she is but one small part of the overarching concept of pride in Russia and Russianness that gradually pervades the film. At first, the viewer is lulled into the false sense that everything that is of interest and admired by the youth of the 1970s is of Western origin, such as Sergey's jeans, his interest in music that includes the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and Deep Purple. Kostya even throws in English words into his Russian speech, complaining about 'Soviet service' when a kiosk runs out of beer (Shakhnazarov 2008, 21:04). However, as the film progresses it becomes clear that the West that Shakhnazarov has conjured is nothing but the 'Imaginary West'. Yurchak defines this as 'a diverse array of discourse, statements, products, objects, visual images, musical expressions, and linguistic constructions that were linked to the West by theme or by virtue of their origin or reference, and that circulated widely in late socialism, gradually shaped a coherent and shared object of imagination – the Imaginary West' (Yurchak 2005, 161). Crucially, the Western objects that Sergey is depicted as revering are revealed to be nothing but empty shells, as perfectly encapsulated in an overly symbolic moment when he happily agrees to trade his prized Super Rifle denim jacket for a taxi ride to Khorezm, the City of the Winds in Uzbekistan that his grandfather discovered (Shakhnazarov 2008, 1:33:13). In this moment, Sergey quite literally rejects the West, turning the opposite direction to the East and finding solace in the place where his ancestors stood. As Sergey stands on the archaeological site, there is no music, simply the birds and his footsteps, a faint smile and a content look cross his face as he gazes out across the expanse (Shakhnazarov 2008, 1:36:33). It is within the Soviet Union, not to the West, that Sergey finds peace after the death of his mother. The rejection of Western tokens that were previously adored is symbolic of a new-found sense of patriotism that is tied more and more frequently to nostalgic representations in Russian popular culture.

Following on from this, it should not come as a surprise that Western commodities and culture constitute a significant part of the film, as these were an integral component of youth identity during this period. It has been argued that the concept of the West, in this case the Imaginary West, was of particular importance to the generation who grew up during the 60s and 70s because they, unlike all previous Soviet generations, “consolidated not on the basis of some epochal achievements, but on the basis of age as such,” (Cherednichenko quoted in Yurchak 2005, 187). For this reason, cultural acts such as buying, re-recording and selling Western music became a uniting feature of their collective identity. As this chapter’s introduction highlighted, it is necessary to distinguish between an object and its associated meaning, for whilst the Party saw rock and roll and other genres of Western music found on the black market as a threat to society, as something that undermined communist ideology, this may be far from accurate. On this topic, Yurchak has argued that ‘Soviet youth tended to ignore any explicit political connection as uninteresting and irrelevant and, moreover, was not particularly interested in the literal meanings of Western songs’ (Yurchak 2005, 208). Sergey’s love of Western music should therefore not be considered as proof of anti-Soviet behaviour. Moreover, the Western tokens employed by Shakhnazarov further amplify the sense of distance between us and the characters. ‘The fact that this picture is made up of objects as equally “emptied” of meaning as the objects of the Imaginary West used to be, only heightens the awareness of spectacle and simulacrum, of the distancing effects of nostalgia’ (Kaganovsky 2008). A quite literal example of objects emptied of meaning comes in the form of the Rolling Stones’ *Goats Head Soup* that Sergey has painstakingly acquired for Lyuda’s birthday. Upon playing it, the record turns out to be quite literally empty of the Rolling Stones. He has been tricked and it instead plays Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. As it transpires, Lyuda is far happier with the Tchaikovsky piece, laughing happily and innocently in what appears to be her childhood bedroom (Shakhnazarov 2008, 30:20) In one simple scene, Shakhnazarov manages to incorporate pride in Russia, innocence, nostalgia and a rejection of Western values.

Linked to the idea of the West is that of the ‘other’, a concept hardly foreign to Russian cultural discourse and which continues to play a role in post-Soviet nostalgia. Russians have been known to posit their identity not on the basis of specific Russian characteristics or values, but rather in opposition to something else. This tendency has become more prevalent over the last three decades as the Russian Federation found itself lacking a fixed national identity following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In terms of *The Vanished Empire* and the concept of the Imaginary West discussed here, Shakhnazarov creates a Russian identity around Sergey, similarly not so much on the basis of any specific national characteristics, but rather in opposition to the Western identity that Sergey appeared to possess at the beginning of the narrative. As the film progresses, there is a growing sense of disappointment in the West, that whilst the idea of it held a key place in Soviet society during the latter years of the Soviet Union, as soon as the USSR collapsed and the borders were opened, the West they believed existed was revealed to be nothing but a fantasy. In this way, by presenting a sense of pride in Russianness through Sergey’s transformation in the film, Shakhnazarov uses nostalgia to propose a solution to the modern issue of a lack of national identity.

Lastly, linked with one of the popular understandings of post-Soviet nostalgia is the concept of historical and cultural continuity, which ignores historical specifics and allows for consolidation of national pride on the basis of nostalgia for a continuous and diverse heritage, rather than for the Soviet Union specifically. The final scenes of the film are significant in bridging the gap between past

and present, acknowledging the almost mythical reach of the Russian empire, united by culture across the centuries. Sergey chooses to turn East to venture to the City of the Winds, the only lasting remains of the ancient civilisation discovered by his grandfather, espousing a sense of history stretching beyond the start and collapse of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the coda appears as a rather jarring juxtaposition between the 1970s and 2000s Moscow. Filmed entirely from Sergey's viewpoint, the viewer is invited into Sergey's world and encouraged to share his perspective. Set over thirty years after the preceding scene, with the camera acting as Sergey's eyes, it is revealed that Stepan and Kostya have failed to find happiness in the decades that have passed, the former is divorced from Lyuda and living unhappily in Finland, whilst the latter died of alcoholism. The West never became the utopia that Kostya dreamed and believed it would be. In comparison, Sergey appears to be representative of the success that is to be found by remaining within the borders of what was previously the Soviet Union. Having studied Eastern languages, he is now a translator from Farsi. The calmness in his voice and his words imply that he has no regrets about his youth, but crucially that he has also decidedly moved on. In contrast, Kostya died unable to do so while Stepan admits that this post-Soviet world is not for him. Sergey is the only character to successfully bridge the space between past and present. The idea of historical and cultural continuity is supported by Ilya Kalinin, whose study on nostalgia describes not a nostalgia specifically for the Soviet Union, but a new form of politics in which we are witnessing 'the positive recoding of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism, for which "the Soviet" lacks any historical specificity, but is rather seen as part of a broadly conceived and comically heterogeneous cultural legacy' (Kalinin 2011, 157). A lack of temporal specificity allows for a more wide-reaching understanding and appeal of nostalgia, to which the Russian public can better relate.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, Shakhnazarov's 2008 film, *The Vanished Empire*, offers an incredibly personal take on life for the golden youth of Moscow in the 1970s and has justifiably been criticised for making it appear quite so charming. The visuals are attractive, with the colours, fashion and backdrops of Moscow adding to the film's beauty. However, it is precisely these features which contribute to the film's demise. In paying such meticulous attention to the era's furnishings, the director has enhanced our awareness of its staging. As a result, the viewer of this film and 'of nostalgia is voyeuristic, invisible to the characters in the film, unseen but all-seeing, able to follow their every action' (Kaganovsky 2008). In terms of the overarching hypothesis being tested in this thesis, Žižek's theory is applicable not only in terms of the subject-object-gaze and the distance created between the spectator and the action, but also thematically. Viewing Lyuda as the true Russian beauty, she is both key to the film's nostalgic appeal – of the beauty and innocence of falling in love in one's youth – and is the opposite of a sexualised character. In this respect, nostalgia and pornography exists on separate planes in the film, except in relation to the West, with the pornographic magazine and Sergey's brief fling with Katya – which comes to an abrupt end at the same time as his love of Western goods does. The sense of guilt-free nostalgia in this case is tied to the innocence of youth, patriotism, a rejection of the West and to an all-encompassing take on Russian history, free from temporal limitations.

4. The Envy of Gods [Зависть Богов] – Vladimir Menshov (2000)

4. 1 Introduction

I now turn to a film which both in visuals and thematics differs vastly from the other two case studies, particularly in terms of aesthetics, and which I have placed in the middle of the spectrum for reasons I will go on to explain. Released in 2000, *The Envy of Gods* [Зависть Богов] was directed by Vladimir Menshov, most famous for his 1980 hit film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*. From an artistic perspective the film cannot be called spectacular, it is an at times clichéd drama about a love affair doomed from the outset between the heroine, Sonya, and a foreign visitor, André. However, in relation to this thesis the film is notable for its depiction of sex and life in the early 1980s, the former being surprisingly explicit, and the latter has quite aptly been termed as ‘nostalgia for the bad old days’ by one film reviewer (Nesselson 2000). Similarly, it is these two characteristics that chat room discussions on the film have revolved around and criticised. The majority of criticism accuses Menshov of being overly negative about life in the Soviet Union, giving an unnecessary amount of screen time to sex scenes and nudity in a cheap attempt at attracting a larger audience, and the choice of Vera Alentova for the lead role, an actress deemed too old for such an erotic film³. The combination of these two accusations make *The Envy of Gods* particularly relevant for this thesis. As with the other two case studies, the chosen location is Moscow and our protagonists are members of the cultural elite. The period itself is an interesting one to have chosen, for whilst Leonid Brezhnev’s tenure and the ‘stagnation’ period has come to be seen as a golden age and enjoyed a large presence in modern popular culture, the rule of Yuri Andropov has attracted less attention. Having succeeded Brezhnev, Andropov led the Soviet Union as General Secretary of the Communist Party for no more than fifteen months from November 1982 until his death in February 1984. Most famously, Andropov’s tenure saw the USSR referred to as an ‘evil empire’ by Ronald Reagan, a key moment of increased tension in the Cold War, as well as the tightening of the labour force. It is against this backdrop that we observe Menshov’s characters going about their daily lives.

As explained by Sonya, the film’s title alludes to ancient times when it was believed that flaunting your happiness would incite the wrath of the Gods. The assumption was that only the Gods had the privilege of contentedness, and for humans to occupy the same level as the Gods would be unthinkable. The spectator is therefore effectively warned that the relationship is doomed from the start, as we know that such happiness cannot last. This idea of everything being doomed is echoed by the increase in international tensions referenced in the film, leaving the spectator in a state of suspense throughout. With the benefit of hindsight, the modern viewer ultimately knows that the very world that Sonya and André inhabit will cease to exist in the coming years. Whilst we attempt to look at this film as if possessing no knowledge of the Soviet Union post 1983, the doomed nature of Sonya and André’s relationship subconsciously reminds the viewer of the doomed nature of the USSR itself. In terms of the question addressed in this thesis, *The Envy of Gods* is notable because whilst both post-Soviet nostalgia and sex are prevalent throughout, they function in unexpected ways and exist in relatively separate boxes within the context of the film. On the one hand post-Soviet nostalgia manifests itself through the kind values of Soviet society and Sonya’s personal connection to her

³ These criticisms were particularly prevalent on the site Kino-Teatr.ru. *The Envy of Gods* currently has 323 posts in the discussion, the most recent being in November 2018.

homeland, which persists even if she is not ideologically strong-willed. On the other hand, her sexual evolution is entirely down to the arrival of a Frenchman, who explicitly criticises the Soviet Union and is ultimately forced to leave the country because of it. In comparison to the other two case studies, the type of nostalgia is less overt, after all the film was criticised for being too negative on the early 1980s, and the sex is less glamourised. This chapter will go on to explore these themes in further detail, examining the concept of dark nostalgia, the role of women within that and its subsequent relation to sex and erotica in the film. By doing so I seek to demonstrate that Menshov's critics missed the point, that post-Soviet nostalgia is indeed present albeit in an unexpected form, and that sex is used as more than a means to attract an audience.

4.2 Synopsis

The date is 21st August 1983, the location is Moscow, and our protagonist is Sonya – an editor in the television industry, who has just realised that it is precisely twenty years since her wedding day to her husband Sergey, a relatively successful writer with whom she has a sixteen-year old son. Set at the height of the Cold War, which features in the form of the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the Boeing incident⁴, *The Envy of Gods* is the story of a love affair set against the backdrop of increasing disenchantment and resentment with the Soviet Union, demonstrated by small acts of resistance and the pleasures found in Western goods. Their anniversary is spent with two friends who have obtained an illicit copy of the 1972 Italian-French film *Last Tango in Paris*, an erotic drama which the horrified Sonya terms pornography as she flees the scene. A sex scene that evening highlights her prudishness and the lack of passion in their marriage. Shortly thereafter, we are introduced to André, a French-Russian journalist who immediately falls for and subsequently pursues Sonya. The remainder of the storyline focuses on their blossoming affair, starting with Sonya strenuously resisting and quickly developing into the two of them engaging in lustful sex in the back of a military vehicle and moving in together. The affair comes to an abrupt end following the publication of an article by André in which he openly criticises the Soviet system and is thus proclaimed a persona non grata. Sonya, a shell of her former self, returns to Sergey and the passion-less life she had beforehand.

4.3 Nostalgia for the negatives?

The depiction of the Soviet Union in *The Envy of Gods* is distinctly more unfavourable than in the other two case studies. However, I argue that this can be viewed as negative in a positive sense, as much of a contradiction as that may initially seem. This is an idea supported by the sociologist Fred Davis, who contended that whilst unpleasant and traumatic memories are not removed from our memory per se, they are removed 'from the nostalgic reconstruction thereof' (Davis 1979, 37). In this way, humans have the capacity to form positive associations and happy memories from a period of time that might have been quite the opposite. One source in his study described how 'I've blocked out a lot of my childhood. I don't think I was that happy as a child, and that's perhaps why. Whereas I think that during adolescence although I was unhappy a lot, it was good unhappiness, if that makes any sense' (Davis 1979, 38). The ability to construct a positive image from a negative past is reflected in Menshov's

⁴ On 1 September 1983, a South Korean passenger flight from New York to Seoul via Alaska was shot down by the Soviets after deviating from its planned route and flying over prohibited Soviet airspace. All crew and passengers on board died in the incident. The total death toll was 269.

characters, who are shown watching an illegal copy of a 'pornographic' film, joking about the cheap price and availability of fish at the Kremlin and revelling in smoking Marlboro cigarettes. Not only are the seemingly negative connotations removed, but they are also turned into an enjoyable memory, a forbidden act to be shared with friends.

Similarly, other theories exist on how the negatives can be transformed into a positive rehabilitation in nostalgic reconstructions. An associate professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Irina Glushchenko, carried out an exercise in which her students described their perceptions of the Soviet Union. Crucially, whilst the unequivocally bleak aspects such as state repression did not feature, 'even the formerly negative aspects of that life, like consumer-goods shortages and queues, are sometimes reinterpreted as sources of simplicity, creativity and innocent pleasure' (Nikitin 2011). The conclusion that she took from this was that, particularly amongst the young and educated, Soviet nostalgia 'is seen as an antidote to the consumerism, anomie and lack of spirituality that blight these beneficiaries of Russia's increased wealth' (Nikitin 2011). Given that this film was released in 2000, the extent to which the previous statement is applicable can be challenged; however, I would assert that this film fits into a pattern that would develop in the 2000s in which the simple life that the Soviet Union was associated with became seen as a remedy to obscene wealth and consumerism. The supermarket queues in the film hark back to a time when we were not consumed by material goods. Interestingly, unlike in Glushchenko's exercise, Menshov addresses both the less severe and the truly dark aspects of the Soviet Union, with references not just to food shortages and nosey neighbours, but also to censorship and state surveillance.

There is little overtly positive depiction of the USSR and the characters are shown making jokes about an obituary, hoping for the death of the General Secretary and speaking in hushed tones to thwart their eavesdropping neighbour. However, in line with the reconstruction of the negatives into positives, these seemingly unpleasant moments are embedded within a sense of togetherness and this idea is crucial to the nostalgic perception of the film. The opening scene when the four friends gather together for dinner introduces the sense of community to us, with the four warmly embracing as one to celebrate Sonya and Sergey's anniversary (Menshov 2000, 8:18). This sense of togetherness and community is key as the idea is deemed by some to have been lost in post-Soviet Russia and the film thus harks back to a time when community, friendship and moral values were uniting factors for Soviet citizens. This sense of closeness is highlighted further by André's comparisons with the West. When André and Sonya escape to the countryside in the heat of the moment, they are welcomed with open arms by the locals, even being invited to participate in the ongoing wedding festivities. It is at this point that André aptly remarks to Sonya, 'it is an exceptionally Russian phenomenon. There is nothing to buy in your supermarkets. It's a desert! But when you visit someone, the table is laden with delicacies. The counter is empty, but the fridge is full'⁵ (Menshov 2000, 1:22:26). It is even more interesting that he says this in an explicit comparison with France, where 'it is the opposite. Your eyes are amazed in the supermarket, yet when you go to a friend's house, there is nothing but small

⁵ 'Соня, это русский казус! У вас в магазине ничего нельзя покупать. У вас пустыня! Но когда ты делаешь визит, на столе есть все. Прилавок пустой, холодильник полный!'

canapés⁶ (Menshov 2000, 1:22:40). Menshov here reveals André to be a cliché of Western expectations and idealisations of the Soviet Union, a subtle social criticism of the Western perspective that fetishises the simple life and innocence that is often associated with the Soviet Union without ever having experienced it oneself.

Continuing in this vein, the nostalgic atmosphere created is bolstered by Menshov's filming techniques. One film reviewer described how 'corny, overwrought score drenches the proceedings; lensing provides plenty of washed-out local color' (Nesselson 2000), and Menshov appears to have made a concerted effort to show off the best of Moscow's architecture, as well as making a clever choice regarding the time of year, with naturally beautiful autumnal colours allowing him to flaunt Moscow to the best of its ability. Architecturally, one particularly striking shot comes when Sonya is waiting for André at the Soviet Army Theatre. Shot from above, Sonya is dwarfed by the impressive size of the columns, the merits of Soviet architecture on full display (Menshov 2000, 1:09:43). Similarly, following Sonya's swift exit from the viewing of *Last Tango in Paris*, Sergey and Sonya are discussing their own uninspiring sex life, and as they do so we are effectively given a walking tour of Moscow by night. Passing by the lit-up bridges as they walk along the embankment of the Moscow river, St. Basil's Cathedral and Lenin's tomb on Red Square, such placement is not accidental. On a symbolic level, if we choose to read into the juxtaposition of the well-known Russian landmarks with the topic of Sonya's lack of sex appeal to Sergey, it could imply an incompatible relationship between the Soviet Union and sex, although this topic will be explored later on.

Despite the above being true this is often overshadowed by frequent references to the truly negative aspects of the USSR, around which much of the online criticism of the film revolved. Even recent complaints from the public called it 'anti-Soviet nonsense packed into a film – it offends the eyes'⁷ (Kino-Teatr 2015), questioned why references to the KGB needed to feature⁸ (Kino-Teatr 2015), and even suggested that Menshov had filmed this 'as if to repay a debt to those in powerful and influential circles'⁹ (Kino-Teatr 2016). The most obvious manifestation of the negatives and a recurring theme of the film is paranoia. In a highly symbolic scene, André chooses the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky as his first covert meeting point with Sonya. Given that Dzerzhinsky was head of the first state security and intelligence organisations of the Soviet Union, this is not a random choice by Menshov and Sonya reacts in shock at the choice of location (Menshov 2000, 37:35). Other depictions of paranoia manifest themselves in passing comments, this in itself highlighting the extent to which the secret police and fear were normalised in Soviet society. For example, as the *Last Tango in Paris* starts to play, Natasha casually mentions that the Russians who illegally dub foreign films hold a clothes' peg over their nose so that the KGB cannot recognise their voices, a comment that receives just a shrug from the rest (Menshov 2000, 8:58). In keeping with attempts at historical accuracy, one scene specifically relates to the tenure of Andropov, who believed in the possibility of improving the Soviet Union by tightening

⁶ 'У нас — все наоборот. Ты приходишь в супермаркет, глаза разбегаются. А потом, когда ты идешь на ужин — private друзья — ты садишься за стол, и на столе... [показывает пальцами чуть-чуть]... Канапе'

⁷ 'Набор антисоветских глупостей, которыми буквально нашпигован фильм - просто режет глаз' (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/hud/2325/forum/f6/>)

⁸ 'Зачем нужна была линия с КГБ' (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/hud/2325/forum/f4/>)

⁹ 'Режиссер его снял, в действительности так не думая, словно отдавая долг неким могущественным и влиятельным кругам' (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/hud/2325/forum/f4/>)

the workforce. Therefore, the scene in which Sonya and André are in a busy cinema on a weekday afternoon when the authorities arrive unannounced to check everyone's documents is highly reflective of the reality during 1983 (Menshov 2000, 54:25). Other criticisms persist throughout, particularly references to the Cold War hanging over their heads. This is evidenced in the fierce debates that occur in the aftermath of the Boeing incident, showing that international politics affected everyone, not just those within the Kremlin. The stream of criticism in the film is epitomised in the rhetorical question by Sonya's co-worker of 'how can an intelligent person live in this country and feel anything but disgust?'¹⁰ (Menshov 2000, 1:43:43). Menshov has by no means adopted a rose-tinted view of the era, instead he offers up the negatives plainly for us to see yet simultaneously ensures that this is not the sole lasting impression left by the oeuvre.

4.4 Ideological neutrality

However, the most interesting viewpoint on the Soviet Union and one that posits the film as unique comes from our heroine, Sonya. Unlike her husband, friends, lover and co-workers, all of whom at some point express disgust or disappointment with the nation in which they live, Sonya offers what can be termed a neutral perspective, although I admit that neutral does not accurately encapsulate her stance. Namely, she adopts a personal rather than political stance, staying out of the political and ideological debates that surround her. Whilst such neutrality could have been an attempt by Menshov to make the character of Sonya more relatable to a wide range of modern viewers, there is more to be said on the topic than this. In a telling scene, as her colleagues at the television station are covering the Boeing incident and Reagan's announcement that the Soviet Union is an 'evil empire', Sonya excuses herself from work to go and collect some possessions and buy a lamp for her new apartment with André. This is a critical moment both in Soviet history and in her work, yet she is entirely uninterested (Menshov 2000, 1:53:18). She similarly remains out of the debate going on at her and Sergey's apartment on the same topic as she quietly packs up her belongings in the background (Menshov 2000, 1:55:32). It is evident that the director is attempting to project a personal and non-political form of nostalgia through the character of Sonya; however, as certain scholars have pointed out, even when it is actively attempting not to be, nostalgia will always be politically charged due to the way that it is interpreted by the viewer (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004, 518). Whilst Sonya cannot be called nostalgic per se, Menshov and his film, particularly through her character, try to accommodate for those modern viewers who feel the loss of the Soviet Union, and attempt to do so through a character set in 1983.

In keeping with the above, the character of Sonya manages to walk a fine line of defending the USSR to those who criticise it without going into any ideological depth. It is plain that she does indeed have a strong affinity with the Soviet Union and the people that live there, even if we cannot term this as positive in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, she is protective of her home and hostile to the judgements of others, scolding Sergey and André respectively that 'that's your country. There won't be another'¹¹ (Menshov 2000, 1:32:01) and 'you haven't been here long enough to draw conclusions'¹² (Menshov 2000, 1:23:30). The most memorable quote from the film is on this topic and comes from

¹⁰ 'Что может интеллигентный человек испытывать к этой стране, кроме брезгливости?'

¹¹ 'Это твоя страна и другой у тебя не будет'

¹² 'Ты слишком мало прожил у нас, чтобы делать какие-то выводы'

Sonya upon hearing that André has told the ‘truth’ in his critical article. She shrewdly responds to her colleague, ‘the truth? What is the truth? Your truth is that we shot down a plane. Our truth is that it violated our airspace. Don’t you understand, there can be no truth in politics. Only power and vested interests’¹³ (Menshov 2000, 2:00:06). With this statement Sonya highlights the subjectivity of the wider political issues that surround us and reminds us that for many, the collapse of the USSR equated to the loss of their home. This reminder emphasises the human side of the phenomenon, the personal loss felt, and by doing so we are encouraged to indulge in post-Soviet nostalgia. It is ultimately difficult to argue against empathising with someone who has lost their home.

4.5 Role of women

Turning now towards the depiction of women on screen, Sonya is the film’s protagonist and is present in near every scene, with the spectator effectively following the action through her eyes. We are therefore very aware of both her actions and her treatment, the latter of which sees her occupying a predominantly domestic role. Despite having a successful career as a television editor, when addressing duties within the household it is made plain that this is all down to Sonya. For example, prior to the upcoming arrival of the French guests, internal organs from the Party appear at their apartment to help set up. They have brought a new toilet, a new pan, and a generous spread of food for the evening. Subsequently, one of the men sternly orders, near threatens, that Sonya must have all the food ready and laid out for the guests by seven o’clock (Menshov 2000, 21:15). Comparable treatment continues during the evening itself, with one of the men irritably coming to find her to make the tea for the guests. Likewise, later on when Sonya announces that she is going to move in with André, she attempts to pacify Sergey by saying that she will come back to cook, do the laundry and check Sasha’s homework (Menshov 2000, 1:52:05). This is an especially telling moment because even though Sonya is escaping her loveless marriage to live with a man she is truly happy with, she is still burdened with the traditional duties associated with womanhood. In a similar vein, as Sonya herself explains, her very name has extreme connotations of what it means to be a woman. In a short conversation with André that draws on the great Russian literary tradition, she explains how her mother named her after two Russian literary heroines, Sonya Marmeladova from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Sonya from Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*. Whilst this seems illogical given that the former is a young prostitute who falls in love with a criminal, and the latter is an unattractive spinster, her mother explained that ‘they knew what love and self-sacrifice were’¹⁴ (Menshov 2000, 1:25:50). With this simple sentence we understand what was expected of a woman at this time, particularly from the older generation.

This judgement and expectation from the older Soviet generation is evident in an interesting scene with Sonya’s mother, who appears at their apartment recounting a story to Sergey, although it quickly transpires that it is aimed at her daughter. Discussing Anna Karenina, she describes initially being shocked when another woman referred to the eponymous character as a ‘wretch’¹⁵ but later came to agree with her (Menshov 2000, 50:02). After all, ‘if an aging woman sacrifices the well-being of her

¹³ ‘Какую правду? В чём на правда? Ваша правда в том, что сбили самолёт. Наша в том, что он нарушил границу. Вы что, до сих пор не поняли, что в политике правды не может быть? Есть сила, интересы’

¹⁴ ‘Они умели любить, жертвовать собой’

¹⁵ ‘Ваша Анна Каренина – стервь’

husband and son, throwing it all into the furnace of her passion. I do not feel sorry for her. Her every move was motivated by selfishness and the body'¹⁶ (Menshov 2000, 50:25). This not only highlights what she believes Sonya's duties are as a woman, but also points out how insignificant passion is seen to be. It is not viewed as something worthy of seeking, whether or not it brings happiness. In this respect Sonya's mother, representative of the older Soviet generation, dismisses the value of sex in one's happiness. Moreover, it is only when Sonya abandons her old life and embarks upon a new romantic journey with André that we see her domestic shackles begin to ease. For example, on one of their first evenings together in the new apartment, it is André and not Sonya who brings home all the food for dinner together. Her return to Sergey at the end of the plot is therefore not just a return to her old life trapped in a passionless marriage, but also a return to a more domestic, traditional role. At the moment that the Western foreigner exits the plot, as does the lust and liberation that were associated with it.

4.6 Sex and erotica

Following on from the above, it is Sonya's transition from a prudish woman who quite literally runs away from watching a sex scene in a film into one who is willing to move out of the home she shares with her son and husband for a passionate, sex-fuelled relationship with a French foreigner that is particularly interesting. It is not by chance that the sexual is so linked with the West, it is a Frenchman with whom Sonya embarks upon an affair, a Franco-Italian film that provides the basis for much of the sexual discourse in the film, and Sergey seems changed and in somewhat of an identity crisis after his erotic visit to France, complete with a peep show. It is generally accepted that the West and its allure became an object of eroticisation and glamourisation in the latter year of the Soviet Union and this is evident in Menshov's work (Attwood 1993). As mentioned, much of the discourse uses the *Last Tango in Paris* as its foundation, having introduced the film in the anniversary dinner scene. Their friends, the couple Natasha and Igor, have gotten their hands on a copy of the banned film, this in itself hinting at the changing attitude and growth of foreign goods on the black market. During this scene, everyone looks on at Sonya, amused and clearly anticipating her reaction. After a naïve question about why the male character would need to fetch oil, it dawns on Sonya that she is watching a sex scene, after which she swiftly flees the apartment. It is the subsequent conversation that is especially telling, for there is a disagreement about what the film represents. Whilst Sonya explicitly calls it pornography, her husband retorts that it is a 'regular elite film'¹⁷ that 'they've watched in all civilised countries'¹⁸ (Menshov 2000, 11:08). This short interaction raises some deeper questions, such as the relationship between sex and the West and that between art and pornography, which I will now explore.

The *Last Tango in Paris*, a distinctly European film, is employed as emblematic of the relationship between Russia and the West, and of the Russian attitude towards sex. For example, the reference to how all civilised countries have seen the film implies firstly that Russia is not considered as civilised, but secondly creates a correlation between sexually liberal values and an enlightened society. This is appropriate given that the rise of pornography in Western Europe did indeed coincide with the

¹⁶ 'Когда стареющая женщина жертвует благополучием мужа и сына, бросая всё в топку своих страстей. И мне её не жал. Каждый её шаг продиктован эгоизмом и голосом плоти'

¹⁷ 'Да почему это порнография? Это нормальное элитарное кино'

¹⁸ 'Это во всех цивилизованных странах'

Renaissance, and with the evolution of Western modernity in general (Hunt 1993, 10), although I doubt the implication was intended to be this advanced. Other moments such as the passing mention of the fact that Sergey visited a peep-show whilst in Paris further highlight the availability of sex in the West, particularly in comparison to the prudishness of the Soviet Union. Moreover, if we look at Eliot Borenstein's ideas on the symbolism of the prostitute, pornography and sex in general, the distinction between love and passion is an interesting one. Sonya's relationship with André is driven by passion and sexual-desire, as demonstrated by the amount of screen time given to their sex scenes and the visuals within them. The fact that she has thrown her marriage away so casually for a sex-fuelled fleeting affair with a Frenchman can be seen as comparable to the way that Russia gave up its natural resources and sold them to the West. Borenstein, in discussion on the symbolism of the prostitute, refers to this as 'a sign of Russian national humiliation – of the desperation of a country forced to sell off its natural and spiritual resources to unscrupulous clients from other lands' (Borenstein 2008, 79). This symbolism may seem exaggerated, yet there is much to be read into Sonya giving herself so fully to a Western character who turns around and heavily criticises the place she calls home. I acknowledge that the film was released in 2000 and the comparison of selling sex and resources to the West had not yet been fully formulated; however, nowadays with the benefit of historical reflection the contemporary viewer may be struck by the comparison.

The link between sex, the West and Russia is not the only topic that the *Last Tango in Paris* raises. There is also a connection between sex and the Soviet authorities, a topic that will similarly be touched upon in the discussion of *The Thaw*. Most symbolically, the very act of the authorities turning up at Igor and Natasha's apartment to confiscate the film and arrest him for its possession is symbolic of the lack of distinction between the public and private sphere, with sex and pornography being classified as public. Moreover, when the police officer proudly proclaims 'comrades, witnesses, come here. You are witnessing the confiscation of a pornographic film. The *Last Tango in Paris* is banned in this country'¹⁹, the immediate reaction of the modern viewer is one of amusement (Menshov 2000, 1:38:28). This is a similar reaction to that which I discussed in the previous case study, and it revolves around the director creating a sense of distance between the spectator and the action on screen. Despite the differences in time period depicted, theme and filming techniques, Žižek's perception of distance is applicable to *The Envy of Gods* in much the same way that it was to *The Vanished Empire*. The above statement by the officer jerks us back into reality as the modern audience grasps the ridiculous state of the situation, a situation in which the authorities arrive after a tip-off from a neighbour for possession of an erotic film. It is in this moment that the spectator realises that their gaze is on a distant, detached past, the opposite of Žižek's objective camera in pornography in which the gaze falls on the spectators themselves (Žižek 1989, 37). This detached gaze in turn encourages the spectator to indulge in nostalgia for a time period which they can comfortably assume will not return, a form of nostalgia which does not seek to re-establish the era in question.

Lastly, I turn to the filming techniques as it is these that stand out and in which the director excels, both in the filming of the sex scenes themselves and in the creation of sexual tension between Sonya and André. The difference in the filming of Sonya's sex scenes with André in comparison to her husband is telling. In an indicative sex scene between Sonya and Sergey on their twentieth

¹⁹ 'Вы присутствуете при изъятии кассеты с порнографическим фильмом запрещенным к показу в Советском Союзе, Последнее танго в Париже'

anniversary, the spectator sees little to none of the action. As the camera moves along the dimly lit corridor of their apartment, we hear only the jarring sound of bed springs moving and heavy breathing. By the time the camera pans around to the bed, the action has ceased, followed by an uncomfortable conversation in which Sergey suggests trying different sexual acts, only to be brushed off by his wife (Menshov 2000, 14:02). The impact of the camera work implies that we do not want to see the act in the same way that Sonya herself does not want to participate in it. This is in stark contrast to the sexual tension and intercourse between her and André offered to the spectator in near full view. After all, Sonya experiences the first orgasm in her life with André, despite having been married and in a sexual relationship with Sergey for over two decades. The tension between the two is introduced early on when they end up in the bathroom together on their first meeting. The camera switches between their faces, the sound of the party has faded, the intensity of the music increases and the spectator is suddenly very aware of the sound of water rushing from the tap (Menshov 2000, 29:56). Their relationship quickly develops and of the three case studies, *The Envy of Gods* gives the most screen time to sex scenes, and far from indirect ones at that. The most memorable scene is filmed in the back of a military vehicle, a highly sensual scene in which we see André's hands in detail caressing Sonya's body, slowly removing her tights, his hands making their way under her underwear (Menshov 2000, 1:13:30). His hands devour her body in the same way that the camera devours it for our entertainment. This is the closest that we come in any of the three case studies to the filming techniques that Žižek ascribed to pornography, as 'the image that "shows all"' (Žižek 1989, 37). Menshov tiptoes around the edges of what is acceptable to show and what is too much, remaining just on the right side of the fence to keep the charm intact (Žižek 1989, 38). The spectator is nevertheless close to being shown too much and the distanced gaze created by certain moments discussed earlier in this chapter is dispelled, at least for a moment.

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have positioned *The Envy of Gods* in the middle of the spectrum in relation to the ways in which it deals with the topics of sex and post-Soviet nostalgia for a number of reasons. Considering the two categories separately, in comparison to the previous and ensuing case study analyses, sex is far more present than in *The Vanished Empire* and relatively equal to what we will see in *The Thaw*, Sonya's erotic awakening dominates much of the plot and is given plenty of screen time. In terms of post-Soviet nostalgia, it is interesting that whilst the film has been criticised for its supposed criticism of the Soviet Union and its flaws, a deeper analysis reveals a particularly provocative form of nostalgia, according to which the negatives of the Soviet Union have been recoded into a positive reconstruction harking back to a time when the simple acts of resistance made life exciting and society was not polluted by consumerism and its immoral side effects. Now turning to the relationship between the two concepts, I argue that they function within largely distinct spheres and are triggered by and associated with different characters. Namely, whilst Sonya comes to be representative of a protective nostalgia for one's home, a simpler time, and a re-coding of the negatives, her sexual escapades and transformation are entirely a result of the arrival of André, a foreigner. The symbolism of a Russian woman abandoning her family for a sex-fuelled relationship with a Westerner who ultimately leaves her heartbroken is not unnoticed. Crucially, this culminates in the two phenomena being shown as irreconcilable when André is forced to leave the Soviet Union because of his critical stance towards it.

5. The Thaw [Оттепель] – Valery Todorovsky (2013)

5.1 Introduction

The third and final case study in this thesis discusses Valery Todorovsky's 2013 12-part series, *The Thaw* [Оттепель]. This programme represents the counter end of the spectrum to *The Vanished Empire* and completes the spectrum of development in that not only are sex and post-Soviet nostalgia both highly present, but they also combine and complement one another, as this analysis will demonstrate. Broadcast on Russia's Channel One in December 2013 and also screened in full at the Pioneer Cinema in Moscow, Todorovsky's first foray into the world of television was eagerly anticipated. The director himself is best known for his 2008 musical-comedy *Hipsters* [Стиляги] which, depicting a youth sub-culture in 1950s Moscow, has become a cult film in Russia. *The Thaw* is debatably a logical next step from *Hipsters*, taking us chronologically a decade closer to the present with an indulgent look back towards the Soviet Union of the 1960s. It is said to be loosely inspired by tales of the director's father, Pyotr Todorovsky, who was active as a director and screenwriter in the Soviet Union during this period. As the title suggests, the plot unravels during the first half of the 1960s in the early years of Nikita Khrushchev's reign under what became known as 'the thaw'. The term refers to the relaxation of censorship and repression, which involved the release of political prisoners and greater artistic freedom, although the word itself has far greater connotations. A thaw implies a stage in limbo, neither frozen nor heated, suspended in a state that cannot sustainably be maintained, filled with both aspirations and disappointment. This idea is echoed in the soundtrack, in which the actress Paulina Andreeva wistfully recalls being in love, and how 'I thought it was spring, but it was the thaw'²⁰ (Meladze 2013). The shadow hanging over the series is that whilst we, the modern viewer with the gift of hindsight, know that the 1960s was indeed a period of limbo, of relative freedom in comparison to the decades prior and latter, the series' characters remain unaware of this. They believed it would be an eternal thaw, and the glamourisation of the era reflects this.

The Thaw was self-styled as the Russian equivalent to the American series *Mad Men* in advertisements; however, whilst in visual beauty, basic themes and time period the two are comparable, any meaningful comparisons end there. *The Thaw* deals with a distinctly Russian culture and period of history and it should be acknowledged that Todorovsky's series provoked serious debate across reviews, film websites and other online platforms. It is in relation to the concept of nostalgia, conformism and Todorovsky's largely apolitical, and in some instances sentimental, take on Soviet life in the 1960s that led to harsh criticism upon release. Whilst the series received high ratings and the reaction of the general public was broadly positive, the same cannot be said of the response amongst intellectual and high cultural circles, namely in newspapers and official reviews. The furore was so severe that the director described it as 'the greatest psychological attack in my life. I did not expect the furious debates that developed, with all but fights, with curses and I was forced to resolve my relationships. At first, they locked horns over whether or not such radios existed. Then it went further. Some shouted that this was a whitewashed reality. Others disagreed. Still others harshly asked, where

'Я думала это весна, а это оттепель'

is the bloody regime, why is it not there? I was astounded'²¹ (Todorovsky, in interview with Pshenichny 2013). The following analysis will go on to examine the grounds for such furore, focusing specifically on the role of nostalgia and sex in the series as a whole, and the ways in which the director links Soviet and post-Soviet conformism and individualism in the arts.

5.2 Synopsis

The setting for the series is 1961 at the iconic Mosfilm studio – the largest, oldest film studio in Russia and well-known for producing some of the most successful films of the Soviet Union. Made up of twelve hour-long episodes, *The Thaw* weaves a large number of storylines into its narrative. Our protagonist is Viktor Khrustalev, a respected cameraman, who, following the suicide of his friend Kostya – a talented yet rebellious and unproduced scriptwriter – proceeds to devote both his time and career to ensuring the deceased's script is produced, and done so in the manner it was intended. At the same time, Vitya is faced with accusations from the authorities who are adamant that he was involved in Kostya's death. Before the studio permits him to shoot Kostya's screenplay alongside the young and ambitious film director Egor, Vitya must first make a comedy, *The Girl and the Brigadier* [Девушка и бригадир] to please the higher-ups at Mosfilm. All of this occurs alongside Vitya's personal life, which is thrown into chaos when his two main love interests both become actresses in said comedy – Marianna, the lead actress and object of both Vitya and Egor's affection (although Egor remains unaware of her relationship with Vitya for much of it) and Inga, Vitya's ex-wife and mother of his child. In addition to Vitya, Egor, Marianna and Inga, a host of other characters add to the drama as we follow the personal lives of those at Mosfilm – namely Sasha (a gay character, Marianna's brother and tailor for the film), Fyodor (Mosfilm's lead director) and his wife Nadya, the camera operator Lusya, and the studio's lead actor Gennady. Made up of love affairs, conflict, parties and vodka, each character is housing a secret and we watch as their personal lives unravel against the backdrop of their professional duties.

5.3 Apoliticism and conformism

As mentioned in the introduction, the series has been sharply criticised for its largely apolitical take on Soviet life during the 1960s. The majority of the critique is targeted at the series' protagonist, Vitya, a man who lacks any fixed ideology, and is neither dissident nor Party supporter. Whilst we might initially mistake him for a dissident – he refuses to cooperate with the police inspector, is determined to make an artistic film that the studio and Party clearly do not approve of, and he does all of this at the expense of his personal happiness. However, it transpires that the main reason Vitya is so determined to get Kostya's screenplay – a tale of war – made into film is to ease his own personal guilt at not having participated in World War II. This was something that Vitya's father had requested and arranged himself, but which Vitya scorns him for, having been branded a coward for not representing

²¹ 'Это была самая большая психическая атака в моей жизни. Такой яростной дискуссии, которая развернулась, чуть ли не с мордобоями, с выяснениями отношений, с проклятьями, я не ожидал. Сначала сцепились: были такие радиоприемники или не было таких радиоприемников. Потом дело пошло дальше. Одни кричали – это лакировка действительности. Другие – нет, не лакировка. Третьи строго спрашивали: где кровавый режим, почему нет кровавого режима, где он тут? Я был поражен'

the USSR. His drive is therefore not a result of a strong political leaning, nor a form of ideological opposition, but rather of personal guilt. This underlines one of the series' key critiques, its failure to offer a concrete ideological standpoint, something which is seen as unacceptable in depictions of the Soviet Union. One critic explained that commentators on online film forums were outraged at Todorovsky because of 'the insufficiently expressed ideological position in relation to Soviet bureaucracy'²² (Bogomolov 2013). Moreover, Vitya is far from the only character to exhibit political apathy and a vague ideology, with the focus for nearly all of the characters remaining on their romantic endeavours and personal life, not on politics. For example, Inga, effectively a single mother and in need of an income, is simply content to be on screen again no matter the film or its political connotations, and for Marianna the entire endeavour is personal, caught between Vitya and Egor. Todorovsky's failure to assert an ideological standpoint in any of his characters is seen as unacceptable, especially coming from an artist whose father was active during the period depicted and therefore fully understood the stakes. By staying apolitical and simultaneously glamourising the era, the director infuriates both those who want the negatives of the time admitted to and those who see it as a golden era. For both groups, conformism and apoliticism are seen as the coward's way out.

Following on from this, if a lack of ideology was not enough, the harshest criticism of the series revolves around the link assumed by some critics between Soviet conformism, as depicted in the series, and conformism in present-day Russia, and once again Vitya is the leading manifestation of this. Dependence on superiors and the conformism that accompanies it is one of the overarching plot points, given that in order to shoot the late Kostya's screenplay, Vitya and Egor must first make *The Girl and the Brigadier*. In fact, Vitya's behaviour infuriated some viewers to the extent that the director has been accused of 'essentially creating an apologia of conformism as the only strategy of behavior under the conditions of Soviet (and possibly post-Soviet) reality' (Kruglova 2014). I would not go as far as to call it an apologia of conformism; however, the reference to the possible prevalence of post-Soviet conformism is interesting, and Todorovsky has been charged with creating a series in which apathy and conformism function as a blueprint for contemporary Russian cultural figures. The basis of this argument is one that appeared predominantly in official film reviews and was built upon the idea that the 1960s was dominated by a tacit agreement between the intelligentsia and the state according to which the intelligentsia would somewhat conform and limit their criticism of the regime, and they in turn would be granted greater autonomy to do as they chose without constant surveillance and censorship. In response to Todorovsky's piece, one critic proclaimed in anger that 'the series suggests that we consider the 1960s as a kind of universal model of the relationship between Bohemia and power in Russia. According to which, for example, if you want to do something of your own, you first need to do something false-loyal'²³ (Arkhangelsky 2013). We can see similar scenarios in the present, and it has been argued that the 'the return of the familiar social contract of the stagnation era and the promise of stability in exchange for political disengagement represent the very essence of Putin's domestic politics' (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004, 513). At a time when the state's role in

²² 'Раздражают недостаточно четко выраженной идейной позицией по отношению к советской бюрократии'

²³ 'И тут, конечно, приходит в голову конспирологическая мысль, что сериал предлагает нам рассматривать 1960-е как некую универсальную модель взаимоотношений богемы и власти в России. Согласно которой, например, если ты хочешь сделать что-то свое, вначале нужно сделать что-то лживо-верноподданническое'

granting funding and screening time remains a factor in filmmaking, Todorovsky's harshest critics were the cultural elite. Some of these saw the programme as a prototype for the way in which they should conduct their work, and whilst such a series would be forgivable from an inferior filmmaker or an overt party supporter, Todorovsky's status as a respected director makes his stance on conformism even more controversial.

5.4 Post-Soviet nostalgia

Turning now to the more obvious manifestations of post-Soviet nostalgia in the series, Todorovsky has also been accused of whitewashing the era and these accusations are justified by the nostalgic ambiance that infuses the entire series. This manifests itself chiefly in a visual sense, in the idea of glamourisation. We are engrossed in an idealistic depiction of the period and its embellishments, in a cinematic return to a time when people lived well, and the filming techniques reflect this. The camera, at the behest of Todorovsky, loves its subjects. The camera lingers slightly longer than necessary on the interiors of apartments, Mosfilm studio sets, and on the perfectly tailored dresses and chic hairdos of its female characters, as if desperate to devour as much as possible every aspect of the early 1960s. Fedya's dacha is far larger and well decorated than is typical and Vitya appears to have a whole apartment to himself, unlike the communal living most were subjected to. These characters make up Moscow's cultural elite and the camera makes sure to demonstrate this. Such a glamourisation caters to one of the common features of post-Soviet nostalgia, in which discourse revolves around the belief that 'we had a golden age' (Narinskaya 2014). This concept exists purely on a surface level, according to which the Soviet Union was a land where the girls were always beautiful, there was food on the table, and everybody was generally comfortable. Todorovsky ensures that he highlights this idea and I would argue that the concept of having a golden age is quite literally implied in episode eight, when Vitya and Inga are being driven to set following their romantic recoupling. Evidently content, they are being driven through the Russian countryside, the entire scene is bathed in the orange light of the sun, as the camera shifts its focus between the sunset and filming the couple from outside of the car (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 8, 16:40-17:28). The visual is striking and infused with idealism, the shot is quite literally golden.

In addition, according to some, one of the features of Soviet society that was arguably lost in the late Soviet years and 1990s and is now starting to return in a positive sense is the concept of cosiness and communal spirit (Borenstein 2008, 228). Closeness to one's neighbours and a sense of communality were long-standing features of Soviet society and remained separate from the Party and its rhetoric, thereby representing what Alexei Yurchak referred to in his study as an integral characteristic of contemporary post-Soviet nostalgia, 'the longing for the very real humane values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities that the reality of socialism afforded' (Yurchak 2005, 8). Scenes such as the dinner party in episode nine reflect Yurchak's statement and remind us of the positives of the era to be found amongst time spent with one's friends. After a lengthy scene showing the preparation of the food, many of the Mosfilm cohort gather at Inga's place, laughing, drinking vodka and singing together (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 9, 34:18). In addition, the very sense of community witnessed in this scene is also one of the fundamental features of nostalgia as a concept, as 'an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (Boym 2001, xiv). Given the uncertainty felt in modern Russian society, nostalgia – which has a profound capacity

to unite even citizens whose personal experiences are incomparable – is a powerful bonding tool, and one that Todorovsky wields with confidence.

However, whilst the above has embraced a more clichéd depiction, it should be noted that Todorovsky goes very much against the grain in one specific theme. I assert that what we are witnessing is a nostalgia for a time when artistic creativity and individualism were goals worthy of fighting for, and it is here that Todorovsky distinguishes himself in terms of nostalgic reconstructions. In a telling and jarring moment in episode ten, the overly positive shooting of a musical scene in *The Girl and the Brigadier* is interrupted and juxtaposed with the arrival of the inspector, who storms onto set and stops the action, yelling, offending and taunting Vitya and the rest of the film crew. Instead of holding back and respecting the authority standing in front of him, our protagonist punches said inspector (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 10, 34:40). One reviewer believes that this ‘is perhaps the only moment when Todorovskii refuses to adopt the water-color perspective for a brief moment, expressing his views clearly and precisely, as the positions of author and hero coincide’ (Nemchenko 2014). Vitya is the ultimate example of this, for whilst Egor and Fedya have moments in which they resolutely fight for their artistic autonomy, Vitya is the only character who consistently defends and fights for his artistic stance throughout. Even Egor concedes at a certain point, prioritising his personal life and happiness with Marianna over his desire to tell the truth through cinema. Todorovsky may glamourise the era and its fashions, but he does so with a higher goal in mind, through his protagonist he reminds us of the value in fighting for individuality and artistic freedom. It is debatable to what extent this was intended to be a comment on modern Russian filmmaking; however, comparisons were inevitable and it may indeed be that Todorovsky is both criticising today’s authorities for their continued interference in the arts and also urging his peers to push to create art worthy of its name. This is an uncommon utilisation of nostalgia as a tool and sets Todorovsky apart from the crowd.

5.5 Staging and façades

Moving on, in terms of its visuals and the ways in which the action on screen is communicated to the spectator, I argue that a recurring theme of *The Thaw* is what I will term ‘façades’ and these in turn are crucial for the nostalgic reconstruction of the 1960s that is communicated to the audience. What is meant by façades is that the characters consistently reappear through the looking glass of mirrors, a camera lens, a car window, a poster on the wall, or on the front page of a newspaper, to name but some of the most obvious techniques employed. The technique is most frequently used with Marianna and Inga, whether that be their conversations through the mirror in the dressing room on set, their faux smiling faces published on the newspaper’s front page, or being filmed through Vitya’s camera on set. To a more extreme extent, the character of Marianna herself could also be viewed as a façade. Egor falls in love with her at first sight based on nothing but her physical appearance, and many of her romantic struggles with Vitya are communicated through a camera lens. For example, her audition for the role in *The Girl and the Brigadier* is so compelling because she has no need to act, instead she is admitting her true heartbreak to Vitya, who looks at her from behind the camera, moving closer and closer in her direction (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 5, 30:43). She is viewed as perfect for the role because her physical beauty is so perfect. Lastly, even the characters themselves seem to a certain extent to be watching their lives from a distance. Taking a scene in episode eleven as an example, Vitya’s sometimes lover – the beautiful singer Dina, arrives at his apartment with guests in tow for a party. As the guests are dancing, drinking, laughing and even fighting with one another, Vitya remains a safe

distance from the action, perched on his windowsill. He watches on as if a spectator on his own life – emphasised by slow-motion shots – in the same way that we look onto him (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 11, 45:51). The sense of watching from a distance is therefore even further enhanced. It is not just the film’s viewers who relate to Žižek’s theory of distance to be discussed below, but Todorovsky’s characters as well.

These façades undeniably contribute to making the visuals more attractive, but the beauty and glamour created by Todorovsky ‘is no world view: he needs it for a distanced stylization of the time’ (Nemchenko 2014). The description of a ‘distanced stylization’ perfectly encapsulates the series (Ibid). Similarly to in *The Vanished Empire*, the staging of these façades is too perfect to be accidental, the over the top placement of female characters in front of mirrors, for example, is too obvious, and we are therefore made unreservedly aware of the fact that we are watching the action from a comfortable distance and that it has been staged as such for our enjoyment. According to Žižek, distance is linked with naivety, and this can be seen particularly with the character of Egor. In this case, naivety is understood as an overly trusting temperament due to a lack of knowledge or life experience. The argument that Žižek puts forward in *Looking Awry* uses American *film noir* as an example. He asserts that when we watch these films today, our relation towards them ‘is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance – ironic distance toward its diegetic reality, fascination with the gaze’ (Žižek 1989, 39). This idea can be applied to *The Thaw*, and to the characters within it, instead of to the *film noir* genre. Taking Egor as an example, he is naïve in thinking that he can make a film to show the Soviet people what he considers to be the truth, all the whilst using state money to do so. Therefore, in relation to Žižek’s hypothesis, on the one hand we are fascinated by the fact that Egor could be so hopeful and selfless in doing his utmost to avoid deceiving the Soviet public, despite the backlash he faces from his superiors. On the other hand, we look at his naivety in a distanced manner, almost laughing at how unaware he is to think this way. This is the closest *The Thaw* comes to agreeing with the theory Žižek put forward in terms of subject-object-gaze.

Lastly on this topic, the façades also play a role in the relationship between Soviet and post-Soviet conformism mentioned earlier in that they can also function as mirrors reflecting our own reality back to us. Kruglova has argued that what Todorovsky does – and I contend that he does this through these façades – is to build ‘a system of mirrors: when looking into them, we see not the world of the 1960s as it was “actually,” but our own “Other”. We discover in the distant and, it seems, long-gone past the mechanics of social rules that are similar [to] our current reality’ (2014). The action occurring on screen – heartbreak, disagreements with colleagues and catering to superiors for example, can all easily be transported into the present. The realisation that these problems are still prevalent in modern society is a jarring reality and adds a new perspective to the programme and its temporal relationship. The idea of the 1960s being mirrored in the twenty-first century may initially make the modern viewer uncomfortable; however, taking into account the possibility that Todorovsky is making the case for artistic creativity and autonomy as values worth fighting for, placing a mirror up to the viewer can only strengthen his argument. By forcing his peers to acknowledge the parallels, the director uses post-Soviet nostalgia in a bid to encourage them to fight against cultural homogeneity and state influence in the arts.

5.6 Sex, erotica, and fetishisation

Inextricably linked with the staging and lust for façades in *The Thaw* is the concept of sex. Sex and erotica permeate nearly every shot, reflective of how Todorovsky and his camera worship their subjects. This is made evident from the opening scene of the pilot, in which we see a nude female, wearing nothing but high heels, smoking provocatively on a public bench outside Vitya's apartment building after a fight between the two (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 1, 6:21). There are frequent references to relaxed sexual morals and plenty of nudity – for example, in the first episode Vitya, who is seen with numerous women over the course of the series, and Dina the singer engage in casual sex, in which the camera focuses on the woman as she orgasms (Todorovsky 2013, ep.1, 63:46). Given the relative absence of nudity and explicit sex scenes in contemporary Russian cinema, this is indeed noteworthy and is testament to the fact that sex has definitely not disappeared off Russian film and television screens. As Kruglova notes, 'every frame of *Hipsters* and *The Thaw* is penetrated by the desire to break through taboos, by the sensual aspiration "to devour" and not just admire and behold' (Kruglova 2014). The idea of devouring the action on screen is highlighted by the fact that even a meal preparation scene is made near erotic. In close-ups, the camera lingers on Vitya's hands as the meat is submerged underwater, the onions and carrots are sliced, and the mushrooms are squeezed (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 9, 31:53-32:24). The fact that such an interpretation could even be made is telling, lust and sex pervade everything that Todorovsky's camera consumes.

Furthermore, the recurrent choice of using a bold red colour in scenes with sexual undertones is evidence of the director's commitment to the smallest of details. Used near exclusively on the female characters, the colour hints at sensuality and power even when the action does not explicitly state it. For example, Lusya is transformed from the overly androgynous unfeminine stereotype she was into a strikingly sexual and confident character thanks to an off-the-shoulder red dress designed especially for her by Sasha. Wearing this dress to go and free Sasha from prison, her love, passion and anger come to the forefront as she yells at the prison guard, made all the more prominent by her outfit, which stands in stark contrast to the grey interior of the prison (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 11, 37:08). Similar flashes of red appear throughout the series, such as Inga's painted fingernails, which Todorovsky ensures perfectly match her lipstick. The camera is zoomed in, focusing only on her hand as she caresses Vitya's face, filmed shortly after their sexual reunion. In a similar fashion, Marianna takes centre stage on her first day on set of *The Girl and the Brigadier* in a bold red dress, the camera moving in slow motion and filming her from behind as she walks onto set (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 6, 21:40). Small touches such as this highlight Todorovsky's commitment to his female characters and their sexuality. For as long as the director continues to produce material such as this, sex is unlikely to leave Russian film screens and the popularity of his work implies that it is welcomed by Russia's modern cinema-going public.

I now turn towards the relationship between the authorities and sex depicted in the series. The official Communist Party line towards pornography, and towards sex by extension, was that it was forbidden, taboo, and did not exist except for reproductive purposes. They considered its very existence as 'a challenge to the authority of the censor and to communist authority as a whole' (Goldschmidt 1999a, 505), so it is interesting that a direct link is made between the Party and the availability of sex, albeit in a fleeting moment. During an interrogation scene between Vitya and the inspector, Vitya's ideological faithfulness is brought into question, but more interestingly than this, the inspector claims

that it is only thanks to those who built communism and the society that they now inhabit that Vitya is able to sleep with all of these beautiful actresses (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 7, 12:39). The comparison is a surprising one and ties the Party to sex in a way that it would typically seek to avoid. Whilst the Party did not explicitly stand for equality of the sexes, believing gender inequality to be a product of capitalism and subordinated to the needs of the proletariat, it advocated for equality in general. It is therefore noteworthy that in *The Thaw*, whilst sexual liberalism is depicted throughout, it is exclusively the women who face the consequences. Early on, we see Inga casually discussing her upcoming trip to the abortion clinic, and Vitya's attitude towards Marianna, who decides to keep the baby, makes it evident that women are alone in this. Similarly, there is also a clear distinction between the treatment of the sexes in terms of nudity and placement within the shot. In line with Western cinema, there is conspicuously more nudity from the female characters than from their male counterparts. For example, following intercourse between Marianna and Vitya, whilst the latter is shown largely under the covers, the former is in plain sight, standing naked at the refrigerator (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 5, 9:54). This is but one example of the sexual imbalance depicted throughout. Whilst this was likely not Todorovsky's intention, it is interesting that the gender imbalance in the series brings up issues of inequality, sex, and its gender related implications that occurred during the Soviet Union and which the viewer likely is aware are still occurring in post-Soviet Russia. Once again, the topics in the series are mirroring those in present-day Russia and the viewer is reminded that a number of the problems faced in the 1960s are still prevalent to this day.

Lastly, in a similar fashion to *The Vanished Empire*, in which Lyuda represented the true Russian beauty and as such was subjected to little sexualisation by the director and his camera, the same – and much more – can be said of the character of Nadya in *The Thaw*. Nadya, the wife of head Mosfilm director Fedya, is depicted from the very first episode as the traditional Soviet housewife. This is made evident through her conservative clothing choice – as seen in episode one, in a plain, shapeless blue high-necked dress, with white collar and contrasted with the floral, more feminine cinched in dresses of the two actresses Fedya has brought home to entertain – (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 1, 20:23), as well as by her fear of Fedya supporting such a non-conventional Soviet film, and her complete faith in the Party. This is exemplified by her unwavering belief in what the press report on Vitya in a front-page article published with his photo and the headline 'a coward is worse than a traitor'²⁴ (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 12, 5:40). She states that it is an organ of the Party and could therefore not possibly be lying to her²⁵ (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 12, 6:42). All of this contributes to the general sense of traditionalism and the fact that Todorovsky explicitly refuses to sexualise her hence takes on greater significance. In a telling scene in the final episode, Fedya has gifted her a dress from Italy which she tries on and subsequently displays with great pride to her husband. Revealing herself in the lilac, tight-fitted, low-cut wrap dress, hugging her every curve and with a plunging neckline that reveals far more of her breasts than we have seen up until this moment, she is thrilled with her appearance. However, Fedya appears horrified and instructs her that if she ever wears that dress again she will no longer be his wife, at which point Nadya immediately moves her hands to cover her breasts and obediently turns away to get changed (Todorovsky 2013, ep. 12, 7:34). From this small interaction, it is made plain that traditional Soviet values should not be sexualised, the two concepts are treated as incompatible.

²⁴ 'Трус хуже предателя'

²⁵ 'Это же газета, государственный орган'

5.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, Todorovsky has managed to create a series in which the glamourisation of sex and the female form contribute to the general sense of idealism and nostalgia to be found in *The Thaw*. The camera adores its female characters and their figures, perfectly draped in the fashionable dresses of the era, and it is precisely through a stylised and sexualised look back to the 1960s that we experience nostalgia for the era. This nostalgia is enjoyed by the viewer at a comfortable distance from the action through the staging and façades that seek to enhance the aesthetic beauty of the series. Todorovsky's nostalgia is revealed to be multidimensional because whilst on a purely visual and simplistic level, the series can be easily criticised for its glamourisation and whitewashing of the thaw period, deeper analysis brings both further justification for criticism and some interesting comparisons with modern-day Russia. It is far more than a rose-tinted look back to the 1960s, instead 'the 1960s are memorized deliberately as a time of an incredible explosion of creativity (art, science, technology, sports) and of the awakening of the concept of artistic autonomy' (Nemchenko 2014). Todorovsky yearns for a time when individualism and artistic genius were the order of the day, no matter the obstacles these artists faced, both at the hands of the authorities and of their nearest and dearest. However, whilst this may have been the crucial message that Todorovsky was trying to get across, the lasting impression is not the self-sacrificing fight in the name of artistry, but rather the beauty of the female form, the pleasure in breaking sexual taboos, and above all an advocacy for conformism as a way of getting through. This idea awoke the Russian cultural elite, who deemed that 'we have before us the whole encyclopedia of Soviet conformism, a dense network of survival practices such as deals, concessions, tenders, exchanges, compromises and betrayal' (Kruglova 2014). This is a damning criticism and highlights the question of whether post-Soviet nostalgia can ever remain truly separate from the present.

6. Findings and Conclusion

6.1 Conclusions from this study

Through close analysis of *The Vanished Empire* (2008), *The Envy of Gods* (2000) and *The Thaw* (2013), this study has explored the relationship between post-Soviet nostalgia and sex in twenty-first century Russian cinema, and in doing so, has demonstrated that sex has not vanished from Russian film screens after its influx in the 1990s. Having taken the hypothesis of Slavoj Žižek as an initial trigger for the research topic, this thesis then moved on to explore the relationship between and nature of post-Soviet nostalgia and sex in a broader context. The results of the film analysis were placed on a spectrum, beginning with *The Vanished Empire* characterised by little to no interaction between the two phenomena, transitioning into a middle ground with *The Envy of Gods* where the two interacted, albeit in a near contradictory manner, and ending with *The Thaw* where they complement one another in a mutually beneficial manner. Furthermore, within each case study the depiction of post-Soviet nostalgia and sex on screen was analysed in detail, revealing their varied nature, particularly in the case of nostalgia. Across the case studies, post-Soviet nostalgia manifested itself in a glamourisation and white-washing of the Soviet Union, a nostalgic reconstruction of memories previously considered unpleasant, and harking back to a time when a sense of togetherness and innocence held a high place in society. It is evident that post-Soviet nostalgia manifests itself in a multitude of ways and the same can be said of sex on screen.

The argument that sex has vanished from contemporary Russian cinema stems from the sharp distinction made between Russian society and culture in the 1990s and from 2000 onwards, a distinction that roughly correlates to the periods in which Yeltsin and consequently Putin have held power. This thesis has not only demonstrated that Russian cinema does indeed seek to sexualise, but also that the sexual often carries symbolic connotations. Most notably, whilst Russian directors seek to sexualise their female characters, they intend to keep this largely separate from what is considered the traditional Russian female, who retains her innocence. In two of the case studies, whilst sexually loose morals were prevalent, one specific character – the traditional Soviet/Russian woman – remains pure, as it were. Similarly, in *The Envy of Gods*, Sonya throws herself into a sex-fuelled passionate relationship with a foreigner in much the same way that Russia initially embraced the West following the collapse of the USSR only to later be turned away. We can confidently assert that not only is sex still visible on Russian cinema screens, but it advances on the typical Western model of sex in cinema and transforms into a concept with meaning. Ultimately, it is evident that the sexual aspect has far from disappeared from contemporary Russian society and visual culture, and we can therefore challenge the binary distinction often made between Russian culture of the 1990s and post-2000.

6.2 Future Research

This study has contributed to the literature on contemporary Russian cinema, post-Soviet nostalgia and sexual discourse and aimed to begin filling a gap specifically in the literature on pornography, sex, erotica and their place in post-Soviet Russian society. The topic of sex on an academic level in Russia has largely been dominated by Western scholars and a very small number of Russian intellectuals who have written prolifically on the subject. This thesis thus contributes to the topic, adding a new dimension by combining it with post-Soviet nostalgia and as such broadening the scope of research.

However, the topic of sex remains under researched, and post-Soviet nostalgia is an ever-developing concept. There are many areas for further exploration, both as separate entities and in terms of their bilateral relationship. Evidently, future research would benefit from consulting a wider range of sources, extending the visual and contextual analysis not only to include a greater number of sources, but also cover additional mediated forms in popular culture, for example music and written media. It would also be interesting to analyse not only the material itself, but also to look into the responses of the audience and examine the different nostalgic interpretations that individuals construct in their minds when watching a film that explicitly looks back to the USSR. The topic can thus be extended to further analyse both the nostalgic production itself and whether its reception and nostalgic interpretation differ from that which was intended.

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