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“This is something we live through every day”:

Negotiating the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt in Russian historical film

Union of Salvation

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Abstract

The study examines the narratives of the Decembrist revolt created in and around Russian state-funded cinema. By exploring the narratives surrounding a particular instance of political dissent in the past, the research seeks to uncover the factors that impact on the negotiation of cultural memory between the text and the audience in the context of state-influenced media. This exploration is based on the case of *Union of Salvation* – a 2019 Russian historical film, created with support from the Russian government and presented as a truthful depiction of the past.

The research is conducted at an intersection of popular culture and memory studies. The theoretical part of work explores the dynamics and mediated nature of cultural memory in connection to historical cinema, highlighting the fact that the examination of audience engagement is largely absent from the field of research. By connecting the concept of cultural memory with the concept of audience engagement, the thesis seeks to uncover the negotiation of memory and historical narratives, performed by the active audience.

The research operates within a qualitative case-focused framework. This provides an understanding of the ways audiences negotiate cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt while engaging with historical film in the context of Russian state-produced and controlled media. The two methods of data generation in this thesis are film narrative analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviewing, with the latter being the dominant method. The interview sample consists of young Russian students and professionals aged between 21 and 26 years.

The film narrative analysis reveals the patterns of narrative structure which present Decembrists as disunited and aimless rebels as opposed to the people in power who are open to dialogue. The analysis of the interviews uncovers consistent rejection of these narratives, which is based on the audience's understanding of the interpretive nature of historical film genre, strong opinions on and knowledge about the Decembrist revolt, as well as expectations of manipulation put on the Russian state-sponsored cinema.

Keywords: cultural memory, historical film, audience engagement, Russian state-funded media, political dissent.

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1. Introduction

We cannot make it a duty for people to think some high thoughts, to think all the time about freedom, to think about equality, about what is right and wrong. Everyone has their own problems, their own lives, but those who create the narratives are more responsible for this, they create messages that sell something to people (Alexander, a 22-year-old student).

Memories largely shape the way people live their lives, influencing not only their everyday experiences and relationships, but larger socio-political decisions, as they might determine what is considered normative in a particular society. On a macro level the past can function as a powerful framing device for establishing or sustaining power relations in the present day (Wijermars 2019, p. 21). Acknowledging the power memories have on private and public lives, this thesis project sets out to explore how remembrance of political dissent is negotiated in Russian popular culture. The focus on the dissent and relationship with power is crucial for the present-day Russia. Political dissatisfaction is growing among the population with the protests and acts of civil disobedience becoming more and more frequent. Simultaneously, the pressure on the dissidents from the state rapidly increases, with several administrative and criminal leverages being introduced after Putin's reelection in 2018.

The study specifically examines the narratives of the Decembrist revolt created in and around the Russian state-funded cinema. Decembrists were a group of early 19th century Russian noblemen and military officers who formed several anti-tsarist secret societies aimed at overthrowing the Russian government. They planned to transform Russia into a constitutional monarchy or a republic, emancipate serfs and grant them land. In December of 1825 these secret societies organised an open revolt against the newly crowned Emperor Nikolai I and were defeated by tsarist forces. While many Decembrists were exiled to Siberia to hard labour, five of them were publicly executed in St. Petersburg because of their open resistance.

As has been pointed out by Trigou (2009), Decembrists became significant figures in both Imperial Russian and Soviet popular culture. For example, the return of several prominent Decembrists from exile inspired Leo Tolstoy to create *War and Peace*, which discussed the pre-revolt sentiments in Russian society. In the Soviet period several films about the revolt and the prominent members of the movement were created. The most impactful of them was 1975 *The Captivating Star of Happiness*, dedicated to the Decembrists' wives, who renounced their aristocratic status and voluntarily followed their husbands to Siberia. The film became a

classic that shaped the image of Decembrists as brave and noble individuals, ready to sacrifice themselves for a higher purpose. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Decembrist revolt was often invoked by activists across the political spectrum, linking them, for example, both to the Communist coup of 1991 and the stand-off during the Constitutional crisis of 1993, as well as to early 21 century Russian protests. Nowadays, the memory of the Decembrist revolt is less prominent in the public discourse, creating an opportunity for reshaping the understanding of this event.

Examining how cultural state-connected elites discuss political dissent, as well as investigating how this discussion is negotiated by the audiences will allow us to understand the ways in which complex relationships, involved in popular culture, shape socially significant memories. The idea that historical narratives and memories are molded to fulfil the tasks of the present (Rigney 2005, p. 14) will be the guiding notion of the research. By exploring the narratives surrounding a particular instance of political dissent in the past, the study will seek to understand the factors that impact on the negotiation of cultural memory between the text and the audience in the context of state-influenced media.

Taking into consideration the notion of the “power of example” (Flyvberg 2001, p.66), the case for the research was chosen carefully. The 2019 historical drama *Union of Salvation* became the basis for this thesis. The film was produced by the CEO of Russian Channel One. It was made in collaboration between a leading film studio in Russia and Russian Channel One with financial support from Cinema Foundation of Russia - a governmental funding body for Russian cinematography. The production of the movie went parallel to several waves of mass protests. The work on the script started during the protests of 2011 and 2012, which made Navalny a prominent figure in Russia, the filming happened in 2018 during the protests, connected to presidential election results, and the film itself came out in late 2019 after another wave of protests.

The film was presented as a response to the Soviet myth of the Decembrist revolt, with the producers of the movie claiming that they would introduce the Russian public to a more truthful version of the events (Mtsituridze 2020). The film was created with the financial support from the Ministry of Culture, with the lead producer and director linked to the government. *Union of Salvation* came under harsh criticism from historians, professional reviewers and the public for distorting the facts and presenting Decembrists in an

unfavourable light. The truthfulness claims made by producers as well as fierce criticism of the ideas promoted by the movie, became the motivation for this thesis.

RQ1: What narratives are created in the *Union of Salvation* film to shape the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt?

RQ2: How does the audience of the film draw upon these narratives and existing interpretations of the event to shape their understanding of the Decembrist revolt?

RQ3: In what way does the genre knowledge and expectations regarding state-funded cinema impact on the engagement with narratives present in *Union of Salvation*?

The study is conducted at the intersection of popular culture theory and the field of memory studies. Specifically, popular culture will be interpreted from the position of contestation, containment and resistance developed by Stuart Hall (1981). The understanding of memory, in its turn, is shaped by the writings of Aleida Assmann (2008) and Jan Assmann (1995) on the topic of cultural memory, highlighting that it is a specific mode of remembering that is institutionalised, objectivised and preserved in symbolic forms. The notions of premediation and remediation of cultural memory are highlighted to establish how the memory of the dissent is negotiated and transformed in the new context. The theoretical focus of the research is put on outlining the audience perspective, which is largely absent from the discussion of cultural memory. Therefore, the classical perspective on cultural memory will be developed further with the addition of active audience perspective and the notion of mnemonic imagination.

The areas of popular culture and cultural memory naturally intersect: cultural memory should be mediated in order to be transmitted from one generation to another, and it is precisely the popular culture artefacts that shape the perception of the past for entire generations, creating images that “resonate with cultural memory” (Erl 2008b, p. 389). What is more, popular culture as the area of study is important as it is “a domain in which we may practice the reinvention of who we are” (Hermes 2005 p. 4). As such, it connects to the concept of cultural memory, which likewise shapes identities of both individuals and groups. The genre of historical cinema as a specific element of popular culture will be the focus of the research as it has the potential to shape how the past is perceived by the nature of their visuality and high detailisation.

The research aims to examine how narratives surrounding the Decembrist revolt are negotiated by the Russian historical film *Union of Salvation* and its Russian audience. According to Grainge (2003 p. 3) “the negotiation of memory describes the echo and pressure of the past as it is configured in present-based struggles over the meaning of lived experience”. By examining the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt, the research aims to investigate potential lines of continuity, promoted by the historical film and conceptualised by the audiences, as well as the ways in which genre knowledge and awareness of production practices shape the engagement with cultural memory through popular culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction to the literature review

This chapter of the thesis consists of five main parts. Firstly, it outlines the fundamentals of cultural memory theory, establishing the foundations and limitations of its classical understanding. This allows to explore the dynamics of cultural memory as a phenomenon and establishes its mediated nature. Following this, the chapter connects the theory of cultural memory with the theory of popular culture, emphasising the interrelation between memory, imagination and generic characteristics of historical cinema. Next, the chapter reviews the connection between cultural memory and audience engagement, highlighting the predominant absence of audience perspective from the research on mediated cultural memory.

Subsequently, the field of cultural memory research in Russian context is outlined, emphasising the existing bias towards the top-down perspective. Lastly, the research is positioned in relation to the existing literature, accentuating the need for in-depth audience studies in the field.

2.2. The dimensions of memory

From cognitive functioning of the brain, which allows for memory to exist, to the embodied commemoration practices, shared culturally, - memory has been a widely researched and discussed topic. In the present time the issue of collective memory has become especially prominent in social science and humanities research. Specifically, some academics point out the boom of memory studies, which started in the 1980s.

According to Blight (2009), several factors have contributed to the present memory studies boom. First of all, the sheer number of tragic events that took place in the 20th century inspired people to discuss and work through traumatic memories – from Holocaust to Stalinist terror, the topic of trauma became incredibly prominent. Additionally, marginalised memories resurged as a result of the dissolution of several empires and the work of civil rights movements across the globe. The academic work and professional history could not satisfy the public interest in the dynamics of memory, resulting in the commodification of memories and their comprehension through art and popular culture.

One of the dominant topics in the memory studies field is the issue of memory, shared by a community. From collective and communicative to cultural memory – academics have been discussing various approaches to studying the emergence and functioning of shared

mnemonic practices. One of the perspectives is the collective memory approach, proposed by Olick (1999). This approach refers to “public discourses about the past as wholes or to narratives and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities” (ibid, p.345). Already in the 1990s J. Olick and D. Robbins (1998, p.105) noted that “social memory studies are non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless initiatives”. They saw the overcoming of this “relativistic disorganization” primarily in the expansion of the sociological analysis of commemorative practices and the leading role of historical sociology in this process.

Another understanding of collective mnemonic practices refers to the concept of cultural memory. The distinction between cultural memory and collective memory has been highlighted by Rigney (2016, p. 66). While the collective memory approach focuses on institutions and actors that are doing the remembering, cultural memory approach focuses on the dimensions of form, identity and mediation. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive. As has been pointed out by Highmore (2016), for the study of cultural phenomena it is crucial to understand the larger institutional context which impacts on cultural dynamics. However, for the purposes of this study the focus will be on the cultural — rather than collective — memory. Thus, cultural practices, seen as not just reflective of society, but as formative of it as well, will be discussed further.

2.2.1. The fundamentals of cultural memory

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is the most influential figure in the studies of cultural memory, referenced by the majority of cultural memory scholars. Halbwachs’s work *On Collective Memory* (1992), originally published in French in 1952, outlines the communicative and socially mediated character of memory. Halbwachs's main points are twofold: first of all, the memories are created collectively – an individual cannot remember without the collective. Memory is relational and is created in relation to family, friends and society in general. People remember by placing themselves in the perspective of a group – and then the memory of the group influences the individual thinking. Therefore, memory cannot exist without a collective or a community. Secondly, people do not simply remember past events – they discourse on them under the influence of a community, they touch them up, reshape their memories and re-remember. This highlights the high subjectivity, non-historicity and non-factuality of memory. Memories are tied to opinion – those of an individual and of a group. This understanding of collective memory frames it as a sum of

experiences which provides an individual with a scheme that helps them make sense of their lives.

Another influential theorist in the area of cultural memory is German art historian Aby Warburg, who focused on visual symbols “pathos formulae”, which structure cultural memories and allow for culture-specific decoding of the past (see Neumann and Zierold, p.229). His unfinished work *Mnemosyne Atlas* insisted on the importance of mediality and media for the construction of cultural identity.

The perspectives of Halbwachs and Warburg were merged together and reinterpreted by German egyptologist Jan Assmann. Jan Assmann decided to move beyond the communicative focus of collective memory theory to explore how memories can be shared within a community across long periods of time, beyond the direct contact between individual witnesses of the events. This was done with the introduction of cultural artefacts and media as crucial parts in the process of collective recollection. Assmann proposed to differentiate between the communicative memory, understood as memory based on everyday communication and temporally limited to a period of a 100 years (1995, pp. 127-8), and cultural memory, which encompasses “all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (ibid, p. 126). World “knowledge”, however, does not denote a factually correct recollection of past events. Indeed, according to Assmann (1995, p. 130) cultural memory

works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation.

Instead, as the researcher points out, cultural memory rather has an “identity- index” (J. Assmann 2008, p. 114), as it involves understanding history with the aim to derive a collective identity from it. Thus, the function of cultural memory is twofold: it is simultaneously formative and normative, helping through storytelling to determine what a specific group is, as well as define the system of values the group is supposed to maintain (J. Assmann 1995, p.131). In other words, through cultural memory a group receives the understanding of its “unity and peculiarity” (ibid, p. 130).

Both the storytelling and instructional functions of cultural memory require a high level of mediation. As cultural identity covers the vast periods of time, it is disembodied and therefore requires systematic “preservation and reembodiment” (J. Assmann 2008, p. 111). Therefore, the key feature of cultural memory is that it is

exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (ibid, p. 110-1).

This leads to the fact that cultural memory can only be realised “institutionally and artificially” (Assmann 2011, p. 9). The necessity to systematically preserve cultural memory in symbolic forms opens the discussion of the power relations which shape and sustain the way the past is remembered. The way this issue is discussed by Jan Assmann highlights several problem points in the proposed theory of cultural memory.

As a scholar who focuses on classic societies, Jan Assmann privileges the exploration of high culture, the formation of grand national narratives and the top-down power dynamics, often associated with it. For example, the differentiation between communicative and cultural memory is, in Jan Assmann’s opinion, largely based on the participatory potential: while cultural memory is thoroughly vetted and prepared by professionals such as poets and writers, the communicative culture is decentralised (J. Assmann 2011, p. 39). The distinction between communicative and cultural memory is further exemplified by the juxtapositions between profane and sacred, as well as between everyday and festive (ibid, p. 43). This effectively excludes the discussion of bottom-up power dynamics, the counter-memory of oppressed groups, as well as the cultural processes associated with popular, rather than high culture.

As Keightley and Pickering (2012, p.101) have noted, “for Assmann cultural artefacts act as triggers or reminders because ‘they carry memories which we have invested into them’”. This conceptualisation emphasises the crucial role of media and material culture as vehicles of memory, but it does not make clear the extent to which mnemonic meanings of material and mediated culture are unstable and contested. Such understanding of cultural memory assumes that the narratives promoted by those in power and systematically communicated through cultural forms are largely accepted by the community they are addressed to.

However, despite these weaknesses, several points of Jan Assmann’s cultural memory theory will form a basis of this research. Firstly, cultural memory will be understood as an interpretation - rather than factual recollection - of the past, which has the potential to shape

the values of the community and its understanding of the origins. Secondly, following the first point, it will be seen as a part of power dynamics inside a community. Finally, it will be evaluated as requiring active preservation through various cultural forms and thus necessarily being mediated.

2.2.2. The dynamics of cultural memory

Jan Assmann's understanding of cultural memory presupposes the static nature of cultural artefacts that trigger recollection and provide a common perspective for remembering. However, other researchers have pointed out that, although institutionalised and objectivized, cultural memory is not fixed and unmovable. There are several dynamics inherent to this phenomenon. As has been pointed out by Aleida Assmann (2008, p. 98), it is forgetting, not remembering, that is a default state of personal and cultural life. Remembering requires active preservation and leads to prioritisation of certain memories over others. Therefore, according to Aleida Assmann, cultural memory exists in two realms: the canon and the archive. The canon is a rigorously selected body of texts and myths that are actively circulated, performed and re-affirmed in the public sphere (ibid, p.100). The archive, on the other hand, should be understood as

the storehouse for cultural relicts. These are not unmediated; they have only lost their immediate addressees; they are de-contextualized and disconnected from their former frames which had authorized them or determined their meaning. As part of the archive, they are now open to new contexts and lend themselves to new interpretations (ibid, p. 99).

The movement from archive to canon can, therefore, be interpreted as a result of power struggle and an attempt to redefine the already existing narrative around communal identities and norms. What is more, forgetting and the movement from canon to archive also has a significant political potential. As has been pointed out by Goldfarb (2012, p. 61), intentional forgetting can be beneficial, as it allows to re-remember and re-invent traumatic, toxic and complicated memories anew, allowing societies to move forward.

The fact that the default operation is forgetting, rather than remembering, is connected to scarcity as the shaping factor in the working and the dynamics of cultural memory. As has been pointed out by Rigney and Erll (2009, p.2), cultural memory is "as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories". According to Rigney (2005, p.16), scarcity impacts on the fact that recollection of the past is restricted and selective, the memories are recycled

and converged and memory models are transferred between memories of different events. According to the researcher (*ibid*, p.17), instead of being seen as a repository of past events, cultural memory should rather be understood as an active performance of selective recollection, done by someone with agency. Therefore, memories are not simply retrieved from an archive, they are changed retrospectively in accordance with what a specific group, that is doing the recollection, requires.

Similar ideas have been discussed by Hoskins (2001 p. 335), who noted that “memories should not be considered as fixed representations of the past in the present, but, rather, they exist across a continuum of time”. Therefore, in order to understand the temporal nature of memory, the process of change through which memories are “lived” should be addressed (*ibid*).

Indeed, according to Rigney (2016, p. 68), cultural memory requires repeated acts of recall – not just preservation. Otherwise, it will be forgotten. Cultural memory is constructed specifically through recursivity and endless repetition – only that way does it become a shared frame of reference (Rigney 2005, p, 20). In other words, for something to be considered a cultural memory, it has to be revisited again and again – often from different perspectives and representations. Various cultural activities repeat and reinforce each other to create and sustain the memory. This signifies that collective remembrance should be conceptualised as a project, not as a result.

As cultural resources are scarce, cultural memory tends to converge, collide and coalesce. As Rigney (2005, p. 24) has noted, the memories themselves can be quite different, but the technologies of memory can be copied. Forms of remembrance converge and spread beyond their immediate culture and the event they depict. It is expressed via the sites of memory - text in a larger sense of the word, which concentrate meanings about the past within themselves. These texts, according to Rigney (2005, p.18), become a “self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment”, concentrating historical meaning in itself and reducing the scattering of memories. What is more, these texts provide frameworks for remembering other similar but unrelated events (*ibid*, p. 19). According to Rigney (2016, p. 71),

What at first sight seem to be unique narratives are actually based on a sedimentation of earlier ones (witness the echoes of Shakespeare in *Band of Brothers*); the sense of singularity arises from the foregrounding of the specificity of the case against the background memory of similar occurrences.

As a result, the memories overlap and superimpose on one another. Notably, however, a memory of an event does not belong to a singular text or memory site; instead, it is made of various interacting texts, which can be mediated through different media (Basu 2009, p. 141). Indeed, as Laura Basu (*ibid*, p. 153) develops this point further, she notes that “texts are obviously never produced or received in isolation, and media products also always interact with other areas of a culture and society to manufacture memory”.

The dynamics of cultural memory described above - such as its recursivity and convergence - explain two other processes, connected to this phenomena. Firstly, cultural memory is supported by the process of premediation - the creation of schemata and patterns of representation, which shape how future experience will be framed (*ibid*, p. 8). Secondly, it is organised by the process of remediation. According to Erll (2009, p. 111), this term highlights the fact that

What is known about an event which has turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the “actual event”, but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives, images and myths circulating in a memory culture.

As Rigney (2016, p. 393) has pointed out, “even despite antagonistic and reflexive forms of representation, remediation tends to solidify cultural memory, creating and stabilising certain narratives and icons of the past”. As remediation stabilises a way of remembering certain points in history through constant repetition, premediation creates the line of continuity in the way past and present events and experiences are interpreted.

Three important themes emerge from the studies discussed so far. Firstly, cultural memory is affected by multiple intra- and inter-media dynamics which shape how it will change over time. Secondly — and subsequently— cultural memory requires complex mediation in order to function and develop. Thirdly, the dynamics of cultural memory that are connected to texts are researched in depth, while the dynamics that go into the production and reception of memories are sidelined.

2.2.3. Cultural memory and mediation

As seen from the previous discussion, cultural memory requires continuous preservation and affirmation, and therefore is highly mediated in “a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts” (Erll and Rigney 2009, p. 1). It is crucial to note that the role of media in this process goes beyond storage and circulation, evident from the

classical theory proposed by Jan and Aleida Assmann. Indeed, media is a vessel of shared recollection, through and around which remembering is performed. This recollection does not presuppose firsthand experience of the events – on the contrary, media allows people to adopt memories of others, as is evident by transgenerational memories of traumatic events. However, the relationship of media to memory is more complex than that of platforming second-hand memories. That is because media are dynamic in themselves – they are influenced by external factors and other media – and they play a key role in shaping the memories. They don't just circulate and convey memories, they impact on them, setting an agenda for future acts of remembrance. As has been pointed out by Erll and Rigney (ibid, p.3),

the shift from “sites” to “dynamics” within memory studies runs parallel to a larger shift of attention within cultural studies from products to processes, from a focus on discrete cultural artefacts to an interest in the way those artefacts circulate and interact with their environment. This shift of emphasis has led in particular to a new understanding of media as complex and dynamic systems rather than as a line-up of discrete and stable technologies.

Several researchers in this area support the complexity of interrelations between memory and media. According to Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011, p.2), media engage with memory simultaneously as a memory agent, an “indicator for sociological and political changes” and as a part of larger sociopolitical processes. In addition to that, Garde-Hansen (2011, p.38) highlights the fact that besides archiving memories, media manifest tradition and heritage, as well as produce collectivities as they mediate memories. According to the researcher, media function as institutions of memory – they produce memories as well as platform and circulate a challenge to dominant memories which they helped to sustain (ibid, p.52).

Furthermore, memories rely on media for production and consumption: media are mnemonic aids, they help the public remember – and they are simultaneously involved in representation which means that they shape the memories, not just circulate them (ibid, p. 60). As has been pointed out by Rigney (2005, p.20) some texts, due to their aesthetic and artistic values, can even become catalysts for new topics emerging as a part of public remembrance. The medium, its affordances and characteristics, play a particularly important role in how something will be remembered and shared. According to Rigney (2016, p. 69), mediation involves

the interplay of various factors: materials and technologies (print, imaging, etc.) for inscribing and storing information; cultural forms and codes for shaping information

into meaningful configurations; conduits and networks for circulating information and linking people through symbolic artefacts.

As has been noted by Rigney (2016, p. 65), media sustain memories through references to culture – a common brain of the society, which preserves and reproduces the stories across time and space. The way memory is recalled depends on the social reality of today – this shapes how and what past is remembered. Nonetheless, remembrance is not perfect – something being socially relevant doesn't guarantee that it is going to be remembered or that the memory will be perfect and stable (Rigney 2005, p. 22).

In other words, while circulating specific iterations of memory, media reproduce the mythologies and communities which are based on them as well as challenge dominant understanding of memory. Indeed, the engagement between media and memory is multifaceted and works as a multi-way process. This includes memory negotiation and contestation.

All in all, cultural memory is not static, but is rather a dynamic result of recursive practices. The borders of cultural memory – or of the stories that constitute it – are broken down by artistic forms of media, which are mobile and flexible. They allow for circulation, reshaping and contestation of memories. Notably, although the multidimensional dynamics of mediation which go beyond mere preservation and circulation are acknowledged, the audience perspective is underrepresented in the research field.

2.3. Memory and popular culture

The contentious and negotiable nature of media memory is especially evident in popular culture texts. While traditional theory of cultural memory is static and predominantly focused on high culture, the latter development of the theory shifts the attention from exemplary art, literature and monuments to the artefacts of popular culture. This change is directly linked to the general shift in sociocultural processes. As, as Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011, p. 10) point out, if before memory was narrated by people with political or academic authority, now it is largely shaped through TV, films and press – the right to narrate the past is now hugely dependent on popular culture. Popular culture challenges the previously established notions about cultural memory through its dynamics and processual nature. At the same time,

merging popular culture and memory studies proved beneficial for the former, allowing it to gain a much stronger awareness of the multiple temporalities of popular culture and the high relevance of various forms of remembering ranging from

practices of collecting to processes of re-production based on older material (Neumann and Zierold 2012, p. 243).

As has been pointed out by Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011, p.5), in order to be sharable and effective, memory must be structured within a familiar cultural pattern. Narrational structure, the structure of a story allows to imbue it with moral messages and instructions. Additionally, it allows the story the beginning, development, and end as well as a protagonist and antagonist – which is crucial for the identity forming function of memory.

Ann Rigney (2008, p. 350) specifically emphasises how the imaginative power of fiction allows for circulation and repetition of memories and can bring them to the status of iconic. As has been pointed out by Rigney (2016, p. 73), due to the aesthetic power of the pieces of art, they can replace the history generated by professionals and become a dominant representation of an event. These fictional narratives create a frame for future recollection of events, working as stabilisers which define how something will be remembered. Indeed, similar ideas are promoted by Keightley and Pickering (2012, p.5), who directly link imagination and memory: according to researchers, while recollecting the past, people are faced with more blank spots than pristinely filled spaces. Therefore, remembering necessarily involves mnemonic imagination, which connects past and present, links identity with memory, the selfhood and social action, tying together first- and second-hand experiences. The imaginative nature of memory has pragmatic potential, with past experiences being understood “as funding a capacity for action in the present” and thus impacting on the future (Keightley and Pickering 2012, p.64).

As has been argued by Garde-Hansen (p. 40), popular culture is affective. It is involved in mediating and reproducing authority and power relations and identity formation. Similarly to this, Morris-Suzuki (2005, p. 25) points out that understanding and recollection of the past is not possible without the involvement of feelings and imagination. It is not purely factual. History has an affective and imaginative dimension. Our knowledge of the past is connected with our identity and emotions and they influence each other in a circular process. History as identification and interpretation are intertwined.

The imaginative power of fiction should not be downplayed: it can be used for good – to bring marginalised memories to surface. Similar point is made by Plate and Smelik (2009, p.5-6): popular culture encourages revision, rearrangement and rejection of memories. The narrative strategies and styles of the conventions of popular culture construct, reconstruct and

deconstruct memories. They make the past present again – not as a factual and authentic presentation of history, but rather as a subjective reinterpretation. In a similar fashion, Keightley and Pickering (2012, p. 74) note that aside from co-existing with other memories which confirm collective identities, memories are also contested by alternatives – often marginalised – which introduces novelty and counters conformity.

Although the innovative potential of media is mentioned by many, the processes by which contestation and reshaping of memories happens beyond the textual realm is absent from the discussion.

2.3.1. Cultural memory and historical film

Nowadays cinema is one of the main places where people mainly encounter the past. As has been pointed out by Erll (2008, p. 390), there are certain modes of remembering which are endemic to a specific media. Radstone (2010) has argued that cinema images have a potential to inform our personal memories. How we perceive a location, for example, can be influenced by how it was shown in a film. However, it does not mean that cinema substitutes memory. Instead, it is a two way street. Cinema memory binds individuals with a national imaginary and with a place – which is an interdependent, two-way process. Own memories of a person might allude to the memory of a film. Images of films become condensed with those that conduct our inner worlds. Subjectivity binds itself with culture, nation and politics through film. It is especially effective when the images and styles of the film resemble memory itself.

It is important to acknowledge that the way a certain part of cultural memory will be mediated - and by extension remediated - will partially depend on the characteristics of the platform used for this mediation. As has been pointed out by Radstone (2010, pp. 340-1) the preexisting context impacts how films rearticulate memories for the public sphere: from genres and pre-established narratives to the sociopolitical factors and institutional regulations. Films have a power to provoke a discussion and reinterpretation of history, however, there is no ready-made receipt or obvious outcome of it. After all, the generically and socially situated reinterpretation of the past still happens on the terrain of individual histories.

Importantly, Mazierska (2011 p. 13-4) points out that when it comes to the cinematic interpretation of historical facts, there is no difference between feature films and documentaries – that is because they both work discursively, rather than provide access to documents. They are different in aesthetic, generic conventions and the expectations of

audiences, but not in the sense of one being more truthful or authentic than the other. Therefore, dismissing feature films as not being authentic enough is pointless. They still provide a view on how history is interpreted and create an image of the past that might be accepted or denied by the public. In other words, historical films are important because they participate in the public discourse of the past — regardless of how accurate and faithful to the truth they are.

Form shapes how films engage with the past, as it is influenced by conventions and codes. The form is as important as the content, as it influences the overall interpretation. Art and popular culture select certain stories and memories and reject other — cultural conventions, on par with technologies — affect what is recalled and what is not. With changing technologies and cultural dynamics, the representation also changes. According to Morris-Suzuki (2005, P. 29-30), the form of the media — with its affordances and expectations — shapes how we engage with history and what we expect to hear and see (compare, for example, engagement with historical textbook and a film).

Specifically, attention should be paid to genre as a structuring force that organises how meanings are constructed in the text and interpreted by the audiences (Frow 2015, p. 10). For example, generic conventions of historical films make it easier to create a sense of authenticity through the extensive use of visual details, which help legitimise the narratives promoted in the text (Stubbs 2013, Carlsten and McGrey 2015). Therefore, researching the establishment of cultural memory would necessarily involve understanding of cultural forms that are employed for meaning making.

Historical films as a genre are as old as world cinematography itself (Rosenstone 2006, p. 11). However, despite the long history, the definition, elements and boundaries of genre are still largely debated. Some scholars exclude costume dramas from the realm of historical films, arguing that such cinema is less factual than historical films, as it only uses historical periods as a background for fictional stories (Harper 1994, Chapman 2005). Other researchers divide films based on how critically they approach the history: therefore, categories of mainstream dramas and experimental dramas are formed (Rosenstone 2001). Finally, a taxonomy of historical cinema based on the orders of representation exists, with historical film being divided into war, epic, biographical and topical (Burgoyne 2008).

This debate over what can and cannot be considered a historical film corresponds with the general nature of the genre as a concept. Genre exists as a structuring force, which “both

enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place” (Frow 2015, p. 10). However, while genres function as interpretive frames, they are not fixed and rigid. On the contrary, they should rather be understood as

cultural forms, dynamic and historically fluid, and guiding people’s behaviour; they are learned, and they are culturally specific; they are rooted in institutional infrastructures; they classify objects in ways that are sometimes precise, sometimes fuzzy, but always sharper at the core than at the edges; and they belong to a system of kinds, and are meaningful only in terms of the shifting differences between them. (ibid, p. 139)

This intrinsic flexibility of the genre as a concept allows for debates over the nature of historical films. As has been pointed out by Johnathan Stubbs (2013, p. 10), historical films are generally diverse in their visual styles and plot types, as they can be set in any period in the past. That is why limiting the historical film genre to a rigid set of elements is counterproductive. Therefore, the thesis will not attempt to categorise the case in focus as belonging to one group of historical films or another. Instead, it will broadly understand it as being an example of historical cinema, which is defined as “films which engage with history or which in some way construct a relationship to the past” (ibid, p. 19). This engagement with the past is done within the film itself, as well as in a larger cultural discourse around it, such as in advertisements and reviews (ibid, p. 28). This understanding allows to explore not only the narrative form and style, but also the way viewers engage with the text of the film to negotiate the cultural memory.

The study will be guided by the idea that the distinct feature of the genre is the re-enactment of historical events, which involves not simply experiencing it anew, but rather re-imagining and re-interpreting it (Burgoyne 2008, p. 8). One of the key issues regarding historical films is their relationship with cultural and social memory. The illustrative power of films concerns historians, as it signals the ability of movies to create a believable representation of the past, shaping the public understanding of certain historical events (Carlsten and McGrey 2015, p. 3). The presentation of history in such films is deemed to be interpretive, rather than factual and realistic, with an unavoidable “hidden or not-so-hidden propagandistic dimension” (ibid p. 10). Indeed, as has been pointed out by Alun Munslow (2005, p. 111), every historical film is fictive to some extent, as the facts that are used in the films are selected and thus potentially ideologically driven.

Therefore, the project will support the notion that historical films are filled with biases of the present that shape the representation of the past depending on the industry and social trends

(Stubbs 2013, p. 45). According to researchers, a given historical film “can legitimize the codified narratives told about history, or it can subvert these by providing a range of competing images, symbols and discourses” (Carlsten and McGrey 2015, p. 9). Since shared understanding of history is important for developing common identity and fostering societal consensus, those in power are motivated to create and finance projects, oriented at forming and maintaining particular ideas about the past (Hughes-Warrington 2007, p. 85). This places historical films on the border between past and present, as well as fact and fiction. This genre is involved in the cultural work of reframing existing narratives. This, again, connects historical films to the mediated nature of cultural memory, which requires particular events to be pre- and remediated.

2.4. Cultural memory and audience engagement

What is evident from the discussion on cultural memory and film is the fact that fiction and the affective nature of popular culture create a platform for the transformation of memory with the potential to both confirm and subvert dominant narratives within one or across several texts. This highlights generic specificity of popular culture texts and the production processes that go into them. What the aforementioned theories lack, however, is the acknowledgement of the audience's engagement with popular culture and the role of people and their connection to texts in the creation of meanings and memories. As has been highlighted by Joke Hermes (2005 p, 4) popular culture is “a domain in which we may practice the reinvention of who we are”. Notably, according to the researcher (ibid, p.6), popular culture is crucial not only for ideological contestation, but also for the formation of individual and collective identities. This directly links the reformationist potential of cultural memory with more personal connections that are inherent to popular culture.

As has been pointed out by Astrid Erll (2008, p. 6) cultural memory cannot exist in just the text alone but should necessarily be actualized in the minds of the members of a particular community. Similar ideas are expressed by historical film scholars, who argue that viewer's perception of historical narratives on screen is complex and should be taken into account while studying historical films (Hughes-Warrington 2007). The connection between cultural memory and private understanding of it is discussed by several scholars. Firstly, one of the ideas commonly associated with cultural memory and media is the concept of prosthetic memory, developed by Alison Landsberg. This concept describes “memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense” (Landsberg 1995, p. 175).

According to the researcher, memories are actualized at the intersection of collective and individual experiences, with the cinema specifically creating for the person a “deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” (Landsberg 2004, p.2). The concept of prosthetic memory assumes emotional connection between audience and distant others and presupposes the influence of the memories on the subjectivity of the audience. In other words, the theory of prosthetic memory implies that cinema reprograms human minds, without providing an explanation of a specific mechanism which allows for this to happen. What is more, this theory dissolves the difference between firsthand and secondhand experience as well as between event and representation of it. In other words, the concept imbues films with immense powers which exclude the possibility for audience agency. It offers an account of one-way relationships between audience and films, continuing the tradition of favouring the text over its audience.

A different, less deterministic approach is taken by Marita Sturken (1997). According to the researcher, personal and cultural memory are not separated by stark boundaries, as “[m]emories and memory objects can move from one realm to another, shifting meaning and context”. Indeed, as Sturken (1997, p. 1) points out

[the] process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed. <...> This process does not efface the individual but rather involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of meaning. Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.

Similar point is made by Neumann and Zierold (2012, p. 237). According to researchers, examination of cultural memory cannot single out a way of remembering an event, as various mnemonic practices coexist within a culture, conflicting and battling for political power. In other words,

[m]emory cultures, from this perspective, are sites of conflicts, in which the mnemonic interests of different cultural groups and their interpretations of the past are publicly negotiated and discussed in regard to their legitimate validity. (ibid)

What Sturken excludes from her discussion of cultural and personal memories are the private possessions that did not achieve relevance in the collective realm — be it cultural, social or political. On the contrary, Jose Van Dijck in her book *Mediated memories in the digital age* (2007) privileges private memory objects, arguing that mnemonic practices are simultaneously individual and social. The researcher describes the concept of personal

cultural memories, stating that these are “the acts and products of remembering in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their surroundings, situating themselves in time and place” (ibid, p.6). Notably, although recognizing the structuring force of cultural conventions in the shaping of memories, the researcher asserts that these conventions “may materialize in an unintended or unforeseen arrangement” (ibid, p.7). In other words, Van Dijck argues for the transformative power of individual remembering.

The shortcomings of Van Dijck’s personal cultural memory concept are highlighted by Keightley and Pickering (2012, p.105): according to them, although acknowledging creativity of such memory, the idea “stops short of accounting for the new temporal meanings that are generated when we are confronted with the radical difference of the past of the distant other”. According to researchers, it is important to take into account how distributed mediation impacts on the ability of distant others to remember together.

The researchers propose (ibid, p. 106) that mnemonic imagination - “as an active synthesis of remembering and imagining” (ibid, p. 7), which shapes understanding of past, present and future - is the mechanism that both allows to encode distant experiences into cultural texts and makes them understandable to the audience who can relate them to their own experience. While acknowledging that cultural memory has a social dimension, which shapes personal remembering through collective practices of recollection and remembering, Keightley and Pickering (ibid, p. 84) still emphasise that “there are aspects of remembering which can only be experienced on an individual basis”.

Furthermore, the coexistence of multiple social frameworks of remembering along with the personal transformative and creative practices of recollections “involves active negotiation and reflexive remembering” which results in “qualitatively new subject positions” (ibid, p. 97). Simply put, instead of adapting already existing modes of remembering, individuals often synthesise different frameworks of recollection, generating their own ways of remembering - along with “multi-perspectival narrative identities for individual subjects” (ibid).

What Keightley and Pickering are arguing for is getting rid of the totalizing assumption that excludes human agency in the process of remembering, replacing it with “exteriorisation of memory and its circulation in social and public domains as involving a dialogue between the

autobiographical memories of the experiential I and the shared cultural forms and processes of the remembering we” (ibid, p. 102). In other words, the researchers advocate for understanding people as creating their own pathways through and across cultural memory. This connects the understanding of individuals as memory agents with individuals as “active audiences” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, p. 29), which critically approach the media and engage with it in complex ways.

From the perspective of studying media audiences engagement is understood as “energizing internal force; rooted in affect and identity, ... a subjective disposition that can propel us to do things” (Hill and Dahlgren 2020). This type of engagement involves audiences “acting as pathmakers in their media experiences” (Hill 2019, p.1), going beyond mere consumption and being able “to participate in politics, to recognise the social and cultural, as well as economic, values of media in our lived experiences” (Hill and Dahlgren 2020). As have been pointed out by researchers, engagement with the media in a political context is a significant investment, dissecting which can help us to understand the reasons people connect and disconnect with political causes (Hill and Dahlgren 2020). What is more, engagement is a spectral phenomenon which “includes affective, emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement” (Hill 2019, p. 61-2) It is shaped by several parameters, such as media contexts, motivations, affective and cognitive modalities, intensities and the consequences of engagement (Hill and Dahlgren 2020). Therefore, examining mediated cultural memory, requires looking into the relationship between the audience and text, as “if a cultural text is to become effective (politically or otherwise) it must be made to connect with people’s lives” (Storey 2003, p. 113). At the same time, as Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011 p. 16) acknowledge, only a small number of works “have probed the mediated memories and ‘media biographies’ of audiences, or have aimed to assess the role of the mass media in the shaping of ‘collected memories’ among audiences”. This study aims to contribute to this underrepresented area of cultural memory research.

2.5. Memory and media in Russian context

In relation to cultural memory in the Russian context, there are several gaps that can be filled with this study. Firstly, work in this field, that concerns Russia, overwhelmingly concentrates on the Soviet period. Great attention is given to the way memories of the Great Patriotic War are politically utilised by Russian elites, making it the leading nation-

building myth (Malinova 2017). Additionally, several studies have been done on the sentimental remembrance of Soviet period, with the focus on the mediated soviet nostalgia (Abramov and Chestiakova 2012, Kalinina 2014, Gorbachev 2015). The topic of traumatic memories has likewise been explored, with attention given to Stalinist terror (Etkind 2009). At the same time, less attention is paid to the cultural memory of pre-revolutionary events, making it a field open to new discoveries. Concentrating on the imperial period in Russian history will allow to uncover larger historical continuities, promoted by those in power and negotiated by the audience.

Notably, the empirical material, analysed in the context of Russian cultural memory, predominantly includes speeches, made by politicians, public policies, state symbols, history textbooks, and commemorative events. This allows researchers to establish grand historical narratives, used for the purpose of building national identity and established from the top-down, as is the case with research by Malinova (2019). However, it limits the ability to examine more narrow aspects of cultural memory, such as the ideas of political dissent. Additionally, it excludes the bottom-up perspective on cultural memory, which is crucial to the studies in the area of popular culture.

One of the latest contributions to the field of cultural memory studies in the Russian context is the book *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*, written by Mariëlle Wijermars. It is a thorough research of several key cultural memories in Russia, as they are presented in popular culture texts - specifically TV dramas. The book discussed a range of memories: major historical periods, such as Time of Troubles, as well as specific personas, such as the 16th century tsar Ivan The Terrible or Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin, who initiated a major agrarian reform in the early 20th century. Following the remediation of these memories through the ages in different TV dramas, Wijermars takes into account the sociopolitical context of their production. The researcher analyses the texts and how they were situated in the specific conditions, as well as conducts interviews with the people involved in their creation. The focus of the book is on the official memory politics of the Russian government and how it is either facilitated or criticised by cultural agents and the media. Although the book provides crucial insights into the production of cultural memories from the top-down under the condition of media freedom decline, it leaves out the question of audience agency and engagement with the narratives, created from above.

To sum up, similar to general research on the topic of cultural memory and popular culture, the studies that focus on Russian context largely prioritise the examination of texts as they are created to be consumed by people, leaving the practice of engagement outside of the discussion. This study aims to approach this gap in the field, combining the theories of cultural memory and engagement to examine relationships that Russian audiences create with a state-funded historical film, which discusses political dissent in the distant past.

3. Methodology and sampling

3.1. Research design

The research operates within a qualitative framework, with its subject matter being not “objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted” (Kvale 1996, cited in Brennen 2017, p. 4). Doing the research qualitatively allows to work interpretively, introducing vivid, locally grounded and complex data which reveals “the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives”, as well as the connections people make to the social world around them (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014, p. 11).

In this thesis the qualitative case-focused approach provides an understanding of the ways audiences negotiate cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt while engaging with historical film in the context of Russian state-produced and controlled media. A systematic interpretation of this engagement allows to examine the values, attitudes and opinions regarding the particular instance of dissent in the past, its interpretation in the present, as well as investigate the awareness of the sociopolitical factors that shape the cultural memory.

The research design consists of two major steps: identifying the narratives about the Decembrist revolt, present in the *Union of Salvation* film, and establishing the ways in which the audience negotiates these narratives to maintain or create their personal cultural memory of the event. This two-step process requires creating a hierarchy of methods, which allows to focus on the analysis of the engagement with the references to specific narratives discovered in the film. The two methods of data generation in this thesis are film narrative analysis, as proposed by Bordwell, Thompson and Smith (2017), and qualitative semi-structured interviewing, with the latter being the dominant method.

3.2. Film narratives analysis

Bordwell, Thompsons and Smith’s (2017) method of film narrative analysis provides an array of tools, which allow to dissect both the narrative and stylistic form of a given film. Taking into consideration the overall aims of the research, this thesis has limited the toolbox of the method to the steps that help to examine the narrative of the film understood as “a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space” (ibid, p. 73). This included deconstructing the plot as “the arrangement of the parts of the narrative as we have it” (Bordwell 2007, p.75), as well as looking at narration, or specific stylistic patterning, which is

supposed to shape how the viewers will understand the plot, and the story world - the “agents, circumstances and surroundings” (ibid) of the story.

As has been pointed out by Bordwell (ibid, p. 94), to uncover the consistent patterns that shape the narrative structure of the film, the analysis should be applied to the entirety of the movie. Therefore, every scene of *Union of Salvation* was taken into consideration while conducting the analysis. The film was viewed 12 times, with memos taken each time.

The narrative form was firstly analysed by segmenting the plot of the film, which involved creating a “written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters” (Bordwell, Thompsons and Smith 2017, p. 68). This allowed to determining the patterns of development, which drove the events in the film, noting the parallels and juxtapositions made by *Union of Salvation* (Appendix 1). In addition to that, several other aspects of the narrative form were established. These were the temporal relations within a film (ibid, p.79-81), cause and effect associated with characters (ibid, p. 77), the extent to which information flow is restricted (ibid, p.88) and the level of subjectivity presented by the film (ibid, p. 90-1). Such approach to film narrative analysis allowed to create rich descriptions of the narrative form, which formed a basis for the qualitative interviews, structuring the aspects of engagement which were discussed with the audience.

3.3. Qualitative semi-structured interviewing

To establish modes of engagement with the film’s narrative, a method of semi-structured interviews was employed. As has been pointed out by Byrne (2018, p. 219-20), this method investigates the values and attitudes of participants, establishing their views instead of producing statistically representative data. The format of the semi-structured interview allows to uncover how the cultural memory presented in the film is interpreted and negotiated by the audience.

The interviewees were asked to re-watch the film prior to the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-flexible interview guide based on the narrative analysis of the film, as well as the parameters of engagement proposed by Dahlgren and Hill (2020). This guide was first tested during a pilot interview. After the pilot, the sequence of questions in the first part of the interview was changed with several questions removed, as they repeated each other.

The questions were modified, added and excluded based on the flow of the interview and the nature of particular answers, allowing to further develop certain points made by participants and simultaneously guaranteeing content consistency across different conversations. The interview guide is shown in Appendix 2. The five themes established in the interview guide aimed at uncovering the general knowledge and opinion on the Decembrists and the Decembrist revolt, the overall spectrum of engagement with the plot and the style of *Union of Salvation*, the genre knowledge and work of the participants and the detailed discussion of the film narratives. All in all, the interview guide was created as a funnel, leading the interviewees from their personal cultural memory to the specific production, its genre and the narratives of the film. The last section of the interview guide allowed for the expression of any opinions that did not fit into the structure of the interview.

All interviews were conducted confidentially via Zoom or Telegram calls and with obtaining both verbal and written informed consent to their audio recording. Participants in the study signed a consent form (Appendix 4) that set out the terms of the interviewing and the way generated information will be used. Before the interviews began, a consent form was read by the interviewer out loud, allowing participants to ask clarifying questions off the record. This ensured that each interviewee knew what the thesis was about and how their interviews will be used for the purposes of the study (Brennen 2017, p. 31).

The interviews ranged in length between 1 hour and 22 minutes and 1 hour and 47 minutes. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed manually. Firstly, it was done to establish a deeper connection with and understanding of the interview content. Secondly, it excluded the possibility of the interviews being saved in the cloud storages of automatic transcription applications. The latter was crucial for the protection of participants' anonymity, as the conversations included politically sensitive statements.

3.3.1. Sampling for the interviews

The sample of the interview participants included 10 young professionals and students - 5 identifying as women and 5 identifying as men - between the ages of 21 and 26. According to polls, this is the most politically active and protest-oriented demographic in Russia (Volkov 2020). These were Russian citizens who grew up in Russia and lived in Russia at the time of the interview. These factors are important as the primary and secondary educational background of the participants had to be the same - i.e. they had to get familiar with the

Decembrist revolt in school as a minimum - in order to investigate the pre- and re-mediation of personal cultural memory. All the interviewees saw the film at least once before being asked to participate in the study. More detailed information about the sample can be found in the Appendix 6.

The interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, which involved obtaining participants through personal referrals from people who share the same characteristics and personally know the respondents (Seale 2018, p.167). According to researchers, this technique is useful in the situations when the participants engage “in illicit or stigmatised activities” (ibid), which in the Russian case includes oppositional activity. Notably, Seale (ibid) points out that snowball sampling may lead to interviewing people with too similar experiences, which would limit the variety of views and opinions and create artificial uniformity. In order to avoid it, this project used multiple points of entry for the snowballing, i.e. several reference people from different backgrounds and places in Russia.

The names of the interviewees were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (Brennen 2017, p. 31). All personal information, such as names of their employers and universities, mentions of the places they reside in or the names of their friends and acquaintances were removed from the transcripts in order to protect participant’s identity.

3.4. Thematic coding

The content of the interview quotations was examined with the application of Thematic Qualitative Text Analysis, or Thematic QTA, as established by Kuckartz (2014). This method was created for analysing texts that have a narrative and a clear structure, formed either by the questions or the author’s intent. Therefore, it was fit for the purpose of this study. Thematic QTA involved categorising parts of the text to discover larger patterns and themes, based on which the research report was created (ibid, p. 69-70). The process involved “looking across the data set rather than within one case” (Rivas 2018, p. 430) to understand experiences of the sample.

Although the research design presupposed establishing interview questions on the basis of the film narrative analysis, the coding of the transcribed interviews was done inductively rather than deductively. That is because while the interviewees discussed the narratives that were identified during the previous stage of the study, the focus of the research was on the engagement with and negotiation of these narratives, rather than on their identification by the

participants. Therefore, the way respondents characterised the film and the narratives could only emerge directly from the text of the interviews, and employing pre-established codes was not feasible.

The study “broke the seal on the data” (Kuckartz 2014, p.27) by descriptively coding the material point-by-point. This involved creating open codes which captured the literal meaning of the interviewees’ statements (Rivas 2018, p. 433). At this stage the points made by participants were labelled descriptively. All the coding was done in the original Russian language, ensuring the semantic consistency of the codes and the quotes they were assigned to (Appendix 7).

After descriptively labelling data in each interview point by point, the study compared the labels of the same interview to each other to create more refined codes (Appendix 8). The next step was to compare refined codes between the interviews to formulate categories (Appendix 9). As has been pointed out by Bazeley (2013, p.158), naming categories too generally hinders the researchers’ ability to identify patterns and access evidence later. Therefore, the study tried to detail the categories as much as possible, specifically applying in-vivo coding to some quotes to identify the most important points (Saldana 2013, p.92). Following this, the categories were compared between each other and merged together to create larger themes. The themes formed the basis for the second half of the analysis presented below.

4. Film Narrative Analysis

4.1. Overall narrative form of *Union of Salvation*

The film opens with a scene in a Paris boarding school in 1808. The school is visited by Napoleon who asks to show him the best pupil. After hesitation, one boy walks out of the line of students without teacher's permission and introduces himself as the best in several subjects. Napoleon asks the boy what, in his opinion, is freedom. The boy replies, that "freedom is the ability to follow your destiny". As Napoleon expresses admiration for the boy's answer, it is revealed that the student is Sergey Muravyov-Apostol, the son of the Russian ambassador in Paris and the future leader of the Decembrist revolt. This scene is followed by a flashforward, in which a grown up - and slightly beaten up - Sergey is interrogated by Nicholas I, the emperor of Russia. As Nicholas reproaches Sergey for organising the revolt, the rebel retorts stating that there is no difference between those in power and the rebels as both have righteous causes and criminal methods. Thus, a protagonist of the film is first introduced to the audience. The purpose of the beginning of the film is to create expectations "by setting up a specific range of possible causes for what we see" (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2017, p. 85). Through this scene, *Union of Salvation* not only established Sergey as outspoken and waiting for recognition, but also highlights the connection between his rebellious behaviour and his ultimate ending.

Sergey's storyline is afforded most subjectivity in the film. It is through his memories the audience is introduced to the story of the film and it is with his dream that the film is ending. Moreover, Sergey is the only character in the film that has a developed romantic subplot with a fictional character, countess Anna Belsky. The psychology and desires of Sergey are explored in depth, with the actions and words of the character consistently presenting him as ambitious - but well-meaning. He is not afraid to speak his mind, take initiative and break orders; however, he is also trying to avoid bloodshed and is not ready to take power by stepping over people's heads. This is illustrated by one of the first scenes in film, in which young Sergey disobeys the orders of the higher ups and personally convinces a revolting Semenovskiy regiment to complain directly to the emperor and spare their commander who unjustly punished them. According to Bordwell, Thompson and Smith (2017, p. 92) such high subjectivity is usually employed by filmmakers to establish sympathy towards the character as well as explain their motives and actions.

Despite the high subjectivity of Sergey's storyline, the overall narration is not restricted to his view. The audience knows more than him or any other character in the story, which creates "the sense of many destinies intertwined" (ibid, p. 88). Indeed, there are three parallel storylines presented in the film. The first one is the storyline of the Southern society of Decembrists, which follows the plans of rebels - Sergey included - who were sent to serve in Ukraine. The second storyline is of the Northern society, which depicts the plans of the Decembrists who remained in St. Petersburg, then-capital of the Russian Empire. The last storyline offers a glimpse into the life of the Imperial family in Russia before, during and after the revolt.

These storylines are explored parallel to each other, with events of one storyline affecting the events of the other, often without the character's knowledge. The presence of these storylines offers a juxtaposition between those in power and those who are prepared to revolt against it. The film focuses on the personal struggles of characters: be it Sergey's love story and ambitions or Nicholas's attempt to gain power after the death of his brother. This follows the conventions of mainstream historical films, where the history is depicted as "the story of individuals" (Rosenstone 2006, p.47), allowing it to personalise and emotionalise the past (ibid).

Notably, however, the unrestricted narration does not include a larger overview of the socioeconomic and political situation in the country at the dawn of the revolt. Most noticeably, the discussion of serfdom is excluded from the film. Abolition of serfdom was the key article of all the Decembrists' programs. However, this point is excluded from the film and should be assumed by the audience based on their extra-textual knowledge of Russian history.

4.1.1. Temporality, cause and effect in the narratives of *Union of Salvation*

The temporal aspects of the plot frame the storylines in a specific way. Firstly, the film heavily utilises flashbacks and flashforwards. Besides highlighting the subjectivity of Sergey, these techniques additionally establish the cause and effect of the events in the film. For example, one of the earliest flashbacks is Sergey's memory of breaking the ceremony of imperial review of troops to offer champagne to Emperor Alexander I after the victory over Napoleon. In this flashback the emperor rejects the offer but asks the generals not to punish Sergey for misbehaviour. At the end of the film, as Sergey is being hanged for organising the

rebellion, he revisits the memory, this time reimagining it with Alexander accepting the offer and joining the regular soldiers - and Decembrist officers - for celebration. This framing of the event suggests that the revolt could have been avoided, if the people in power were more open to the young and progressive officers.

These flashbacks and flashforwards additionally allow to fold the narrative time, excluding years of the Decembrists' lives from the narrative. The duration of the story events as presented in the plot is also notable. While the *story* of the film spans over 18 years, the plot dedicates significant attention to the events that took place in 1825 - immediately before and during the revolt. This prioritisation excludes the development of relationships between different Decembrists, with the audience seeing all the rebels together only at the beginning of the film as they drink and discuss their political views.

Overall, the narrative of the film presents the story of the Decembrists revolt as a personal struggle between those in power and those opposed to it. What is more, while the film explores the motivations of the majority of Decembrists, it encourages the audience to establish emotional connection with only one character - the one that is least in favour of radical action.

4.2. The characterisation of the Decembrists

As the plot of *Union of Salvation* is heavily character driven, it is important to explore the motivations of the Decembrists, presented in the film, to establish their goals and expectations and analyse how the movie explains the outcomes of the revolt. Although the film follows the generic tradition of presenting the history through the eyes of witnesses, in this film the witnesses are themselves actors with agency, whose actions directly shape the history of the country.

4.2.1. Ambition and rebellion of the Decembrists

One of the patterns of the plot is the presentation of Decembrists as heavily ambitious and rebellious, in some cases bordering on selfish and corrupt. As has been mentioned previously, this is most evident in the protagonist of the film, Sergey Muravyov-Apostol. From the beginning of the narration, young Sergey puts himself in the spotlight to present himself to Napoleon and later personally follows the French emperor as he leaves instead of looking at him through the window like the rest of the pupils. This demonstrates the strong will of the

character and the desire to achieve his interests despite the rules that might limit him. Similarly, Sergey breaks the rules when he offers champagne to the emperor, and later as he talks to the revolting division instead of waiting for the reinforcement that would violently force them to calm down. All these examples indicate the willingness to act, to put himself in the front, to do what he finds necessary, and to disobey those in power. Nonetheless, the clear goals of Sergey are not established. In the film he rejects several plans of actions, with the end goal of his rebellion being left off screen. Beyond desiring to overthrow the government, Sergey has not stated any specific ambition. As the character says himself, while Napoleon wanted the whole world, he desires even more; however, what this “more” encompasses is not explored. As a result, his rebellion and death are ultimately seen as tragically unnecessary and aimless.

Sergey is not the only rebellious and driven character in the film. Pestel, his co-conspirator from Southern society, is also presented as ready to act, and unlike Sergey, his goals are clearly set. His ambitions, however, have a distinct negative characteristic: unlike Sergey, who tries to limit the scope of violence, Pestel advocates for the murder of the emperor and a military coup. In his movement towards this goal he is ready to step over people, including his co-conspirators and friends, and undermine their safety. For example, in the summer of 1825 the preparations for the revolt were threatened by the exposure of the fact that Pestel took money out of the army treasury for the purposes of the revolution. To cover for this, he forces his fellow co-conspirator Mayboroda to sign a document stating that it was him, and not Pestel, who took money for his personal gain. This sets a chain of events which leads to Pestel’s plans being uncovered by the emperor and his general as Mayboroda writes a denunciation. The arc of Pestel ends with him willingly surrendering to the police instead of trying to flee the prosecution. As his plans become useless, his goal changes to framing himself a martyr who would inspire future revolt. At the end of the day, Pestel is ready to sacrifice everything, even his life, for his cause. However, due to his previous actions and the violent outbursts highlighted by the actor’s performance this is presented as calculating and even mad rather than sincere and heroic.

Finally, another Decembrist that is presented as ambitious is the fictional private Baranov, who was demoted from the rank of a major for an unknown reason. Throughout the entire film he follows Sergey and participates in the rebellion boasting about Decembrists’ plan and even exposing them to the local colonel. However, as revealed at the end, Baranov’s goal was

never to enact the constitution or overthrow the absolute monarchy but rather to get his status as a major of the army back when the new people come to power. As such, it is shown that the movement is predominantly used by the Decembrists to fulfil personal ambition rather than larger political and societal goals.

4.2.2. Decembrists as disunited

In addition to being divided geographically, Decembrists are also clearly shown to be divided ideologically - and unable to come up with a common strategy or even a common goal. Notably, the Decembrists in the South and Decembrists in the North do not align politically either, they have constant disagreements and cannot proceed with plans as there is no commonality between them until the very last minute, when the stakes are heightened to the extreme.

The disagreements are seen in the first and only scene, in which all the lead Decembrists are present together. These key members are Sergey Muravyov-Apostol, Prince Trubetskoy, lieutenant Mikhail Bestuzhev-Ryumin, poet Kondraty Ryleev and colonel Pavel Pestel. After the revolt in an army division, where Sergey serves with his friend Bestuzhev-Ruyimin and prince Trubetskoy, the co-conspirators come together at the apartments of poet Ryleev to discuss the event and establish what it means for their plans for Russia. From their exchange it becomes clear that they disagree on fundamental issues. Pestel desires an army revolt which will lead to a complete overthrow of the current government and the establishment of the Republic in Russia. Ryleev desires to reshape Russia in the image of the United States. Bestuzhev-Ruyimin envisions something closer to the French revolution. Trubetskoy, however, is afraid that these scenarios will lead to the death of aristocrats, not only of the Imperial family. The members of the movement are visually divided into groups with Sergey and Prince Trubetskoy standing away from the rest of the rebels, quietly confounding in one another. The scene ends with Pestel breaking a plate with the brand of Imperial China and toasting Ryleev to the death of the emperor. This makes Sergey and Trubetskoy to exchange concerned looks. The group has not achieved a common strategy as there is no commonly established goal.

The point of Decembrists disagreeing is repeated twice afterwards, establishing a pattern in the narrative form of the film. After the rebellion in the regiment, some of the conspirators were sent to Ukraine, among them Pestel, Sergey and Bestuzhev-Ruyim. Five years after the

events of the discussion at the Ryleev's apartment, the Decembrists in the South are shown to be planning their actions again. As Pestel describes a bloody plan to kill Emperor Alexander and his brother Nicholas during the next army viewing, Sergey reacts with disapproval. Pestel asks him "Do you want to win or do you want to be a hero?". Sergey responds "I want to win as a hero", the rest of the Decembrists disappointingly grunt, pointing out that there was no progress, neither in revolution, nor in their careers for the last five years.

Finally, as the plot of the Southern part of Decembrists is revealed, Pestel comes to St. Petersburg to discuss a potential plan of action with Trubetskoy and Ryleev. While Pestel insists on a common assault in the light of the Southern plot being discovered, Trubetskoy and Ryleev dismiss his pleas claiming that the Northern society should not suffer for the mistakes of the Southern society, and thus Pestel should just disband his wing of the movement. This exchange results in threats and insults, yet it fosters no coordination between the divided parts of the rebellion. The inability to work together coupled with individual ambitions are shown as the set up for the failure of the movement.

4.3. The mercy of people in power

The story of the Decembrists ends with their revolt being violently suppressed by tsarist forces, with the leaders of the movement publicly hanged. It is notable, however, that the violence against the rebels is not portrayed as a villainous act on behalf of the people in power. Instead, Nicholas I and the higher ups who interact with the Decembrists are shown as victims of the circumstances made to deploy deadly force after exhausting other options.

Throughout the film those in the position of power aim to avoid violence and active conflict, trying to talk Decembrists out of rebelling until the last moment. For example, as the assassination plot is revealed to Emperor Alexander I, he asks his general not to act on it and limits his response to cancelling military viewing and verbally warning co-conspirators through his adjutant. As he points out, both the revolutionaries and he want the same changes in the country. Thus, none of the Decembrists are arrested.

Later on, the first explicit confrontation between a Decembrist and the authorities is shown with Ukrainian Colonel Gebel reproaching Sergey from spreading revolutionary ideas. While Gebel expresses his dissatisfaction over Sergey's behaviour, no threats are made towards him. What is more, the conversation is not followed by any repercussions for the Decembrists. As

Gebel points out, the Sergey's actions are aimless, as he already has everything that could be desired.

Similarly, the attempts at dismantling the rebellion at the Senate square in St. Petersburg start with general Miloradovich trying to peacefully convince rebelled regiments to leave the square and beg forgiveness from Nicholas. Even after he is fatally wounded, the tsarist forces refrain from employing deadly force against the Decembrists, resorting to cavalry charge to lower the morale and scare the revolutionaries away from the square. The attempts at peacefully ending the conflict stop after a count asks the rebels to leave on behalf of the new emperor. The count offers a peaceful and safe way out for the insurgents, stating that Nicholas does not want to know their names. As this offer is rejected with one of the Decembrists trying to shoot the count, the emperor agrees to the grapeshot attack. In total, *Union of Salvation* presents 11 scenes in which people in power are trying to talk the Decembrists out of rebelling.

After the grapeshot attack, as the rebels start to flee, running towards the frozen Neva river to cross into the Peter and Paul fortress, the emperor asks to shoot cannons at the ice, sparing people. The death in the cold water is presented as more humane than the death from bullets and cannons. In this manner, the theme of the mercy of those in power is expressed, with the limitations to the mercy being established.

Instead of a conflict, the film proposes a dialogue between those in power and those opposed to them. That is done explicitly, with several characters in the position of authority stating the need for cooperation instead of resistance. For example, the character of a Senator who acts as a mediator between the rebels and the monarchs throughout the film implores Ryleev to abandon revolutionary ideas the night before the revolt. As an alternative, he suggests that the Decembrists should work together with people close to Nicholas to influence the decisions of the new emperor.

The need for dialog instead of resistance is reiterated in the penultimate scene of the film. This scene presents the interrogation of Prince Trubetskoy conducted by the new Emperor Nicholas I. During the interrogation, both the emperor and Trubetskoy stand facing one another, with no restraints put on the latter. As Nicholas asks Trubetskoy about his plans, he points out that he was ready to speak with the disgruntled Decembrists but their revolt made it impossible. Notably, while the camera shows Trubetskoy from the perspective of the emperor, the Decembrist is filmed at eye level. At the same time, from the perspective of

Trubetskoy, Nicholas is consistently shown from a low angle, towering over the camera. The stylistic decisions of the scene are of special importance as they highlight both the potential equality between the emperor and Trubetskoy and the perceived imbalance in power between the two.

5. Engagement analysis

5.1. Premeditation, knowledge and expectations of the Russian audience

As has been discussed previously in the literature review, audiences do not engage with popular culture texts with a clean slate. Instead, while experiencing films they reference their genre knowledge as well as their understanding of the production and promotion of the films. When it comes to historical cinema, another important point of reference is the pre-mediated cultural memory: audiences are to some extent familiar with the events depicted in the film or similar points in history, which frames their engagement with and understanding of a given iteration of memory. The interviews have shown that the young Russian audience mostly based its engagement with *Union of Salvation* on three pre-existing points: knowledge of the depicted historical event, understanding of historical film as a genre and the expectations that they have regarding Russian cinematography in general and state-funded projects in particular.

5.1.1. Prior knowledge and attitude towards the Decembrist revolt

As the interviewees were selected from the pool of young Russian citizens who were brought up in Russia, all of them encountered the story of the Decembrist revolt in secondary school, where the event is briefly taught during the 19th century segment of Russian History. It is important to note that at that time the majority of participants did not become intensely invested into this topic, with Alisa, a 22 years old Master student, explaining that the discussion of the revolt “was not accentuated and textured” enough to interest her as a child. Nonetheless, eight out of ten interviewees claimed to expand on their knowledge of the Decembrist revolt in later years as a part of their university education, because of personal interest in the subject or both. The expansion of knowledge ranged from reading program documents of Decembrists to watching documentaries and discussions with professional historians on YouTube. Notably, explicitly fictionalised narratives were not a popular source about Decembrists for the interviewees. Out of all research participants, only Alisa watched another feature film about Decembrists. Additionally, Pavel, a 24 year old podcast creator, primarily engaged with the story of Decembrists through the narratives created by classic Russian literature, for example, *War and Peace* and poems by Alexander Pushkin. The rest of the participants preferred to dedicate time either to educational content or to primary sources, such as Decembrists’ letters, diaries and program documents of the Decembrist movement.

This showcases that the premediation of this event was predominantly done within education context rather than through popular culture. The discussion of the Decembrist revolt, performed by the young Russian audience, therefore, exists in the realm of historicity and factuality, rather than artistic interpretation and explicit symbolism. This puts an emphasis on the historical accuracy of the event, which is evident from the interviews.

The period of time after highschool was the time when interviewees claimed to form conscious opinions on the topic. For example, Anna, a 26 year old architect, linked her understanding of the revolt with the formation of her political views, stating that

Seven years passed between school and this film. That is, after watching this film, I began to think about it a little differently, because I had already acquired more stable political views. I have a more competent, adequate, reasonable assessment. Rational. At school, we are still children and there is no such stable position, our environment, teachers influence us a lot, and when a person grows up, he has more stable principles.

Similarly, Dmitry, a 24 year old marketing specialist, claimed to become interested in the event and the movement “around 3 years ago”, after researching multiple sources. According to him, he has strong political opinions which impact on his understanding of the Decembrists.

My beautiful Russia of the future is a free state where there is not one dictator, but there is a parliament, where laws are enforced, the constitution has weight, and therefore the zeal of Decembrists is certainly sympathetic to me. But again, there are a lot of additional factors here. I love history, and politics, because it's all basically intertwined. But I cannot say that the sources of information influenced me and formed my position. No. Still, I tried to draw on some bare facts and give them my own assessment.

Most commonly, the interviewees characterised Decembrists as progressive educated aristocrats who aimed to install the constitution in Russia, abolish serfdom, reform the army and establish a more democratic, collective management system of the state. All interviewees stated that they approved of their intentions, with several participants particularly highlighting the thoroughness of their plans. For example, Elya, a 22 years old tutoring school administrator, described them as

progressive and rather brave people who had an opinion about the political structure that Russia needed. Their thoughts were quite collected, that is to say, this was not just a bunch of young people who decided to organise a coup. As far as I know, these were very thoughtful actions.

However, the overall assessment of the Decembrist revolt varied significantly among the interviewees. Anna stated that she is neutral towards the event, seeing it as a mere historical fact. Dmitry and Alisa expressed regret over the failure of the revolt, with the latter participant explaining that for her Decembrists are a symbol of attempted progress. At the same time, both Dmitry and Alisa, as well Alexander, a 22 year old student, criticised the method of the revolt, stating that for them violence of any kind is unacceptable and wishing that Decembrists had had other means to achieve their goals. Contrary to the rest of interviewees, Lev, a 24 years old bank worker, felt explicitly “repulsed” by the event, as he saw Decembrists as oathbreakers who wanted to kill a lawful monarch.

What is important to note, however, is that despite the diversity of the overall evaluation of the event and the Decembrists’ themselves, the majority of interviewees had strong and stable opinions on the issue of the Decembrist revolt prior to watching the film, which they claimed came from their extensive knowledge on the subject.

What was also prominent among the interviewees, however, is the idea that unlike them, the majority of Russians do not have a clear understanding of the Decembrist revolt, as it is largely left outside of the public cultural memory on the official and unofficial level. For example, Marina, a 24 year old international relations analyst, explains that a more prominent memory, associated with Decembrists, is the memory of their wives who voluntarily followed them to Siberia in order to share the exile with their husbands. The memory of the event itself, of executions of the Decembrist leaders or of their goals is less prominent. Similar ideas were expressed by Dmitry and Elya. As Elya points out, discussing dissent in Russia is generally “uncustomary”:

As if it prompts some thoughts, as if it could inspire someone or something else ... It's so ... convenient to talk about where the government is good, where it won, where it showed itself to be a powerful leader for the sake of people. But it is inconvenient to talk about how it treats those who want to argue with it.

The lack of discussion around dissent in general and the Decembrist revolt in particular results in an opportunity to shape the public understanding of the revolutionaries and their movement. According to Alexander, this is exactly the goal of the film. This connects to Aleida Assmann’s idea regarding the passive memory. As the story of Decembrists is largely in the cultural archive in the present, it can be brought up and framed more flexibly than the narratives that the Russian public is more familiar with and with which it has close ties, such

as the memory of the Great Patriotic War. At the same, it is interesting to point out that while the respondents believe that others do not possess the same knowledge or opinion on the topic, all but two interviewees held similar views on Decembrists and the revolt.

5.1.2. Understanding of historical film as a genre

In addition to pre-existing understanding of the Decembrist revolt, interviewees had strong expectations associated with the film's genre. All but one of the participants identified *Union of Salvation* as either a historical film or a historical drama. Although varying in details, all of the participants determined specific criteria they believed a historical film should fit. Predominantly, interviewees mentioned the focus on real-life events, historical accuracy of the general story outline and the presence of characters, based on real historical figures. This fits into the general framework of the genre, determined earlier in the literature review.

Opinions on the level of historical authenticity which they expected varied between interviewees. For example, Evgeny, a 24 year old lawyer, believes that a historical film does not have to be historically accurate in every detail, allowing the filmmakers "some digressions if they explain some of the characters' motives". The fictionalisation is acceptable to him, as long as these digressions do not "completely contradict the real facts and characters". Dmitry affords films similar flexibility, noting that they are accepted as long as they serve artistic purposes. Similarly, Alexander, a 22 year old Master student, claims that he expects historical films to provide a point of view on the facts rather than to simply recite what happened, highlighting that he expects the director "to rely on the facts, not invent them out of thin air, but think some things out, since not everything is known".

At the same time, Elya and Anna highlighted the potential educational value of films in such genres, referencing the fact that school children often watch historical films instead of reading textbooks. For them the historical accuracy of such films is a priority in their assessment.

Authenticity is the most important thing for me. If you turn on a film about a historical period, about a specific event or a phenomenon, then it must be reliable, because you change the form of the story: you could have read it in a book, but you chose to watch a film. And the film must match the book. It should not be that you watched an entertaining movie and nothing was left in your head. Well, probably in historical cinema, it seems to me that drama should not come to the fore. This is still more of a narrative focused on facts, and not on drama (Elya).

However, regardless of the accepted or desired level of authenticity in a historical film, all the interviewees acknowledged that historical films offer an interpretation of the past, which is often shaped by the present-day context, rather than provide an exact retelling of the events. For example, Alexander, a 22 years old student, cannot “imagine history without interpretation at all”. To him, any text, no matter how specialised it is, always offers an interpretation of the past rather than its perfect recollection, with historical films being even more interpretive because of their “artistic component”. What is more, Alexander establishes a clear influence of the present on the representation of the past.

It seems to me that a historical film is always about the present. As I see it... a historical film is made by people in the present, with their ideas, feelings, experiences and values. Not only is the script written, but the actors also live in the present, and they play based on the ideas that they have in the present, including values. They decide what these historical characters will look like. It seems to me that they show the present but with the help of the language of the past. Some values and ideas about what is good and what is not good, how it should be and how it should not be. They describe it with the help of pictures from the past.

Similarly, for Evgeny, the present cultural context determines what creators would want to “build upon the historical basis”. According to the interviewee, in most cases this manifests in artistic interpretations which are grounded in the director’s and screewriter’s personal beliefs. However, the socio-political and economic context of *Union of Salvation* makes it “a tool for simply influencing the consciousness of the masses”. According to the lawyer, the film had a goal: “to claim that they show how it was in reality, to rid it of the veil of the Soviet ideology, but in fact to replace one idea with another”.

5.1.3 Assumptions about Russian films

The expectations put on Russian state-sponsored productions are another factor that impacted on the audience’s engagement with *Union of Salvation*. For example, Alisa emphasised that she is conscious of the influence state funding has on historical cinema, making “truth” almost impossible to find in productions, sponsored by the government. According to her,

They love to rewrite certain events in all states, in all social realities, and if they don’t rewrite them, then give them a different colour <...> Many historical films, especially those made in relation to public administration, for example, sponsored by the state, do not have the task of letting you form your own understanding. They have the task of creating the necessary idea of the events that took place.

The majority of the interviewees highlighted that the fact of the film being sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Fond Kino, a governmental body that finances Russian productions,

turned them against the movie even before they watched it. For example, Alisa expected “a typical cardboard story: Decembrists bad, people in power good, do not trespass and we will all live happily”. In a similar fashion, Evgeny admitted that he had biases and assumptions regarding the message of the film even before the viewing.

Since the film was made on the state budget ... There was an expectation that there would certainly be some ideas quietly laid down here, regarding the general image of the Decembrists, which should be formed after a viewer watches the film. Well, I could not categorically say that the film would definitely be like this without watching it. So I watched it and saw that I was right.

Similarly, Dmitry felt immediate distrust after seeing the logo of Fond Kino on screen. After watching the film he felt the need to research the topic further because of his distrust of the state-funded productions.

I didn't expect it to be a super detailed historical film. I initially understood that this was filmed with the support of the Ministry of Culture and the Cinema Fund, and they like to lie. That's why I immediately got into reading all sorts of sources, because I was wondering about what really happened.

This signals the audience's awareness of the semi-authoritarian system, which shapes Russian media context. According to Morozov (2015, p. 94), the early development of the resource economy in Russia made the state the dominant entity that subsidized civil society. This led to the Russian state taking up a paternalistic role with regard to the media. According to Dunn (2014, p. 1435), such paternalism is aimed at limiting the pluralism of opinions and discussion of sensitive topics. While in academia Russian state dominance in the area of media is predominantly discussed in relation to journalism (see, for example, Vartanova 2012), Russian film critics extensively discuss it in relation to cinematography. For example, journalist Andrey Arkhangel'skiy (2013) compares current practices of state-funding historical blockbusters with the Soviet tradition of *goszakaz* - a film created on a state budget, which “must uphold some ideology”. Overall, such relations lead to Russians often interpreting media as an essential part of state power structure (Vartanova 2012, p. 132).

All in all, the interviewees approached *Union of Salvation* with the expectation of historical facts being manipulated because of the expectations put on Russian film in the historical genre due to the soviet and post-soviet media context. Like Dmitry, several other respondents described the urge to fact check the film after the viewing. Notably, Elya stated that she generally checks the accuracy and authenticity of every historical film she watches,

approaching such production analytically, rather than emotionally, connecting her expectations put on the genre and on the Russian state-sponsored cinema.

In addition to that, several interviewees admitted that they first encountered negative reviews of the film before watching it, which impacted on their opinion. For example, it was exactly the criticism that the film received on social media and in the press that encouraged Kristina, a 23 year old paralegal, to watch the film as she wanted to see the reason the film was viewed so unfavourably. What is more, Alexander prematurely accepted that the film will be historically inaccurate because of the statements made by publicists and historians that he trusts.

I have a list of historians that I trust. I trust people who write for Arzamas (a Russian media about culture, - V.S.). Tamara Eidelman, for example. I trust them. None of these people said that there is authenticity there. History generally is not a plot, history has no beginning and no end, no climax. Therefore, I cannot say that a film can be authentic in terms of historicity at all, but in this case it is simply not historically accurate because historians whom I trust have said that there are many facts that simply could not be there.

On top of that, interviewees highlighted their initial scepticism towards the film because of its general Russian origin. As Alisa said, she does not have high expectations of Russian movies, unless they are “auteur cinema”. The same statement was made by Kristina, who highlighted that she does not “expect something incredible” from Russian mainstream cinema, “especially when the Russian Cinema Fund is engaged in it, and Konstantin Ernst is producing it”. Similarly to them, Elya, Evgeny and Dmitry expressed that their expectations were low, as they are used to poor quality productions made in Russia, with Pavel specifically explaining that he is sceptical of “projects of Konstantin Ernst”.

Notably, the poor quality is expected specifically of the plot of the film, rather than of its visuals, costumes or the actors work. That is because in the current context the audience expects the plot of state-funded productions to focus on delivering a message rather than telling a compelling story. As Marina explained, she does not doubt the talent of Russian costume makers, cameramen or set designers. However, she noticed that “in recent years the goal of Russian historical films is to make people leave cinema saying “that's how it was! We are proud of our past and everything in Russia is good!”.

Contrary to the rest of the respondents, Lev had high expectations of the film specifically because of the financial support from the government. While acknowledging that “we have a

problem with good movies”, he made a point out of trusting the production, made by a Russian director, using the word *russskij*, instead of *rossiysky* to describe the creator of the film. While the word *rossiysky* denotes a civic identity - as in citizenship, the word *russskij* is used to describe something ethnically Russian. For example, according to this logic, a film made by a tatar - a person belonging to a turkic ethnic minority in Russia - can be described as *rossiysky*, but not as *russskij*. Lev ascribes high quality to the film a priori because of its state-sponsored and national - and even ethnic - origin, while the rest of the interviewees ascribe low quality based on the same principles. Overall, however, the Russian state-sponsored media encouraged strong negative engagement on the part of the audience.

Overall, engagement with the narratives of the film was heavily shaped by the previous knowledge of and opinion on the Decembrist revolt, as well as assumptions and expectations that the interviewees placed on the genre of historical films and on Russian productions. The majority of participants approached the film with strong views on the events, as well as explicit scepticism expressed towards the Russian state-funded production. They expected the facts of the event to be interpreted and even distorted, based not only on the generic conventions of the movie, which allows and even calls for opinionated recreation of the past, but also on their experience and opinion of the media supported by the Russian government and awareness of the practices similar to *goszakaz*. This resulted in higher scrutiny of the film’s narratives.

5.2. Negotiating film narratives and the memory of the Decembrist revolt

The understanding of generic conventions, the pre-established assumptions regarding the quality and the goals of Russian state-sponsored films, as well as strong opinions about the Decembrist revolt, which many of the interviewees claimed were based on facts and knowledge rather than symbolic interpretation and fictionalised narratives, impacted on the way respondents engaged with and negotiated the narratives present in *Union of Salvation*. The most prominent mode of negotiation was rejection, caused by pre-established scepticism and based on the clash with the premeditated ideas about Decembrists.

Although the majority of interviewees claimed that a historical film can interpret events and does not have to necessarily be absolutely historically accurate, a large proportion of the respondents still engaged with *Union of Salvation* within the framework of looking for factuality and desiring a comprehensive explanation of the events. That was connected to the

feeling interviewees have regarding the public memory of the revolt: since it is an event from a distant past that does not have live witnesses anymore, the audience felt that the film was responsible for the maintenance of the knowledge and the memory of the Decembrist revolt. Therefore, they scrutinised it heavily, looking for what is lost and what is lied about.

5.2.1. Stumbling over “storytelling incompetence” of *Union of Salvation*

In line with its genre, *Union of Salvation* carefully works on its mise-en-scene, creating authentically looking sets, costumes and make-up which were complimented by Marina, Anna, Alisa, Elya and Lev. According to the film’s promotion, it focused on the material details such as banners, firearms, historically accurate uniforms made of cloth “created in accordance with old technologies” (Melnikova 2019), and hairstyles, with costumes specifically being called “surprisingly truthful” (1TV 2019). Historical films often invest into visual authenticity, as according to Stubbs (2013, p.39), the feeling of accuracy in such cinema is routinely created with the excess of visual details connected to the past. These details “collectively provide evidence not only of ‘being in’ the past, but also a sense of realism which potentially overwhelms and negates areas of dispute” (ibid, p. 41). Notably, however, while discussing *Union of Salvation*, interviewees highlighted that, as Alexander put it, “the most important thing in any work is the plot, the meaning, but here it is disgusting”. For Evgeny, the emphasis on the large-scale and beauty of the film felt like a manipulative tactic to make *Union of Salvation* seem more truthful:

Perhaps this was the task of the authors. To win over the viewer with such massiveness, epochality. So that the viewer already psychologically trusts what is happening in terms of content. But I don't link it.

Furthermore, Pavel highlighted that for him the visual style of *Union of Salvation* felt too “museum-like” and “uninhabited”, making the look of the film seem less authentic. In other words, despite the aim of the visual details to convince the viewer of the film's authenticity, the audience felt the opposite, providing one more example of resistance to the desired narratives.

Greater attention was given by the participants to the plot structure of the film. The interviewees highlighted that the film displayed general storytelling incompetence, with Pavel calling it a “dramaturgic failure”. Specifically, the lack of exposition, the jumps in the narrative time and the absence of details about key characters that would explain their actions, were pointed out by the respondents.

Why all this is happening is not clear, the motivation of characters is not disclosed, the chronology is not disclosed, and some historical facts that are important are not explained to the audience. Moreover, the authors themselves understand this, and when they realise that they are covering events so complex that people need to understand at least something, they put a huge amount of text into the frame that needs to be read. It is also being voiced, this text. It seems to me that this is generally unacceptable for feature films. That is, it raises questions for me, why is it so difficult for the viewer... It means you have some kind of problem, guys, if, in order to connect and explain to the viewer what is happening in the frame, you must voice the text to them, and this is still not enough (Evgeny).

This perceived incompetence encouraged the audience to approach the film with even heavier scrutiny, further establishing already existing scepticism towards the film. What is more, the incoherent plot structure inspired several interviewees to conduct their own in-depth research on the topic which resulted in them rejecting the message of the film long after the initial viewing. For example, Krisitna, who admitted that she had substantial gaps in her knowledge of the Russian history and was not aware of the specifics of the revolt itself and the goals of Decembrists, claimed that the film failed to explain to her anything about the event or its participants, making the presumed message of the film effectively useless to her, as she generally could not comprehend the narrative. Elya, who also did not have extensive knowledge about the Decembrist revolt before the viewing, stated that the film “left her no choice” but to do additional reading on the subject after watching the film. As she stated,

Perhaps if the plot had not been so torn, if it would have been smoother, more detailed, then I would not have gone to read more. I would have been like “ah, well. The information is learned, the picture is damn cool, everything is so smooth, everything is logical, everything is explained. Okay, that is how it was. This film leaves you no choice - you have to go and read, because you are like “who was this? What did this conversation mean?” And then it turns out that there was no such conversation, and this episode was completely different. For example, the uprising of the Semenov regiment, which is shown in a different way than it was in reality. You find one inconsistency, the second inconsistency, and decide - I’ll go and read another review, or maybe I’ll read this book to understand. Then it’s all catching up, and you’re like... interesting. This film is not historically accurate at all.

As a result, she started questioning the narratives that were present in the film stating that her implicit discomfort because of feeling manipulated by the film became explicit. She completely rejected the interpretation of the Decembrist revolt presented by the film. Therefore, the strictly technical incompetence of the film from the standpoint of moviemakings encouraged the audience to engaged with it negatively, which, in the context of authenticity’s heightened importance, led to the dissection of film’s factuality and resulted in almost unanimous rejection of the narratives and portrayals presented by the movie.

5.2.2. Looking for omissions

As a consequence of the respondents feeling confident in their understanding both of the historical event itself and the potential for manipulation presented by the genre and the Russian media context, interviewees predominantly focused on discussing what is absent from the film. This was common among interviewees who claimed to be well-versed in the topic. As Evgeny highlights, he had expectations regarding the story that were not fulfilled, which made him “nitpick more, pre-setting myself against the film”.

You wait for the first 15 minutes, after 20-30 minutes you understand that everything is not as you wanted, not as you expected and something is wrong. You feel like they try to sell you something in this picture and you begin to be even more wary of the film, and as a result, at the end of the viewing, you already begin to tangle this kind of ball of negativity.

Seven participants in the study said that they felt as if the film was trying to give them a specific idea of Decembrists that was different from reality. Elya directly claimed that *Union of Salvation* was trying to “manipulate” her mind, stating that the intent of the producers was to show her what to think. This manipulation, according to the interviewees, was done through omissions and re-framing of the facts rather than through addition of direct lies. For example, Dmitry, Evgeny and Marina pointed out inconsistencies in the representation of emperor Alexander I, who on screen claimed that he desired the same changes as the Decembrists. This, according to them, was not true, as the liberal attitudes were shared by the emperor before 1812, while after the European campaign Alexander I largely became more conservative, reverting several liberalisation policies. As Marina puts it, “I know about arakcheevshchina [a regime of police and military despotism in the first quarter of 19th century - V. S.], but if you don’t know about it and only look at the film, Alexander seems very nice”.

Furthermore, as Alexander points out, the on-screen text that appears at the end of the film connected events that were separated by more than half a century, linking together the Decembrist revolt and the killing of Alexander II by political terrorists in 1881. According to the interviewee, this established a chain of cause and effect that is supposed to turn the audience against Decembrists. Notably, *Union of Salvation* frequently uses on-screen text, owing to the fact that a film set in the past often needs to “form connections with events beyond its own narrative world” (Stubbs 2013, p. 21) in order to immerse viewers into the story and “stitch the events depicted in the main body of the film to written accounts of

history” (ibid). In *Union of Salvation* the on-screen text appears several times throughout the film, explaining events that were not explored visually. According to Stubbs (ibid, p. 21), written text on the screen might connect the film to a more authoritative form of historiography, as the written history is perceived to be more trustworthy than the dramatised and visualised one. The formal style of the text and its simple expository language create a sense of neutrality, even though the facts presented in this way are also selected and rhetorically processed. Although the aim of the on-screen text was to further the truth claims of the film, the pre-existing knowledge and bias of the interviewees nullifies this effect, leading to further scrutiny and skepticism.

Connected to this was the recurring criticism of the temporal leaps that characterised the film. *Union of Salvation* omits 5 years of the Decembrists’ lives before the revolt of 1825, during which they, according to interviewees, were most productive in developing their plans.

There is literally this flashforward, as it were, five years later. It's outrageous, just because... Like, uh... What does five years later mean? It was the twentieth year, then it became the twenty-fifth. It was at this time that the Decembrists were doing their work! It was at this time that it was decided why they wanted an uprising! It was at this time that they trained their soldiers, they found people in the army who could support them. At that time, their views were formed, they met there, discussed, yes, that is ... It was simply omitted. (Evgeny)

The majority of participants specifically criticised the omission of the Decembrists’ political goals. This was caused by the absence of the Decembrists' secret meetings, during which they discussed and debated their programs. According to Alisa, Dmitry, Evgeny and Marina, the film created an impression of Decembrists not understanding what exactly they are doing and why they are committed to the revolt.

The motivation of Decembrists in the film is not traced. Their main goal is to change something and be participants, that is, they want to be heroes. Sergey is talking about this, I want, he says, to be a victorious hero. Accordingly, in the film they are driven by vanity, some kind of thirst for change. What is it based on? It is not clear. (Evgeny)

There was only one dialogue dedicated to the collective discussion of Russia's problems. And it was very, very broad. Nothing specific was indicated, and it seems to me that it was done on purpose. Like, they didn't even know what they wanted, although they actually knew what they wanted, it just doesn't become clear from the film. (Alisa)

Contrary to the rest of the interviewees, Lev, who, as has been previously established, generally disproves the Decembrists’ goals and supports actions of the Russian monarchy, felt like the depiction of Decembrists was accurate. According to him, the absence of the

Decembrists' motives and goals from the film is justified, as this was the reality. To him, the actions of Decembrists were a result of “youthful maximalism” and “burning hearts” that were coupled with malicious ambition of some of Decembrists. Lev's engagement with the film was largely positive, which was consistent with his high expectations from a state-funded production.

5.2.3. The devil in the details

Furthermore, as the interviewees point out, the film paints Decembrists as disorganised, vain, aggressive and ready to risk someone else's lives and wellbeing for the achievement of unclear goals. As has been pointed out by Alisa, it is specifically the small details that determine how the character of a historical figure will be judged, and the small details in the film point to the picture that she disagrees with. Similarly, Alexander emphasises that “in the camp of Decembrists, details that speak well of them are not shown, and in the opposite camp, details that speak badly about them are not shown”.

According to the interviewees, the manipulation of images is especially evident in the way Sergey is presented in the film. Sergey was unilaterally identified by the interviewees as the main character of the film, making him the lens through which the viewers observe the events of the movie. As Pavel ironically states, he is presented as a “sharp kid” and “an alpha”, who is ambitious and outspoken - and who is not to be taken seriously. According to Alisa, over the course of the narrative Sergey transitions from a moderate and safe young man with ambitions into a violent fanatic, who is ready to commit murder to achieve his political goals. Similarly, Dmitry characterised Sergey as a “progressive guy who took a wrong turn”. This interpretation of the character made respondents feel annoyed, angered and confused, as it clashed with their pre-established ideas about Decembrists and Sergey in particular.

This image is contrasted with the image of people in power, specifically Nicholas, who is presented as “consistent” and “righteous”. Generally, according to Alexander, Dmitry and Pavel, the film presented two camps rather than specific characters who were supposed to be compared to each other. This was especially evident in the way the disunity of the Decembrists' camp was established. While, according to Evgeny, the Decembrists are shown to “quietly dislike each other”, the people in the pro-tsarist camp are presented as united under one leader. Similarly, Alexander connects this depiction of the Decembrists' disagreement with general criticism of democracy, common among Russian political elites.

In one camp, there were scandals and disputes, and disputes were not in a good sense of the word, as in a normal parliament, but disputes like in the kitchen, so dirty, unpleasant, with threats, about money ... That moment when he went with a gun and demanded a receipt... And in the other camp, everything is beautiful, because everyone obeys each other implicitly. This moment of relationships within different camps is also a narrative. To obey is good, because not to obey means disputes, fights, threats and dirt. You don't want this, do you? Then better obey (Alexander).

At the same time, according to the majority of the interviewees, the film was trying to create a confusion and “blur” both the image of the Decembrists and that of the people in power. As Evngeny pointed out, the goal of the film was to evoke a sense of ambiguity, rather than establish a direct disgust or disapproval of Decembrists.

Overall, the negative framing of Decembrists was rejected by 9 out of 10 interviewees. Describing his experience of watching the Decembrists being disorganised during the revolt, Dmitry highlighted “internal disagreement”, as it clashed with his previous “mythologised” ideas about Decembrists. Similarly, Evgeny felt “frustrated” and “disappointed” by the way in which Decembrists were shown.

While the absence of facts and details, caused either confusion or frustration and ultimately rejection among the majority of the interviewees, those facts that were present made them feel like the manipulation of the film is generally inefficient. As Evgeny stated, it is hard to twist the facts so much as to make Decembrists the villains and people in power the heroes. Similarly, Elya stated that for her the execution of the Decembrists was the key moment that determined her attitude towards the event. Therefore, several respondents noted a clash between what the film was trying to portray and the outcome of this framing because of the reality that could not have been reshaped drastically enough.

Notably, the annoyance at the image of Decembrists promoted by the film encouraged several participants to think about the rebels in a more positive light.

Talking about Decembrists ... I actually started thinking about them, let's start with this. The film reminded me that there were such characters in history. This is first. Secondly, I began to think about them better. The film shows them as unfounded, frivolous guys, but it turned out that in reality they were cool characters. I started thinking about them better and, first of all, I started thinking about them as brave people who did not sit, wait and endure, but tried to do something. They really tried something and unfortunately it didn't work out, at least the way they wanted (Elya).

This movie had the exact opposite effect on me. That is, at different periods of my life, I changed my attitude towards Decembrists, I thought about it, maybe they were

wrong. But in the end, after this film, you willy-nilly, just on an emotional outburst, you think, well, listen, these guys are definitely heroes, because if you look like that, I have nothing left for them but respect (Evgeny).

Overall, the narratives previously established through the film analysis were recognised by the respondents. While the interviewees acknowledged the presence of the narratives, they rejected them with reference to their pre-established understanding of the revolutionaries themselves and their actions in particular. Therefore, the pre-existing knowledge about the event, their personal views on the revolt coupled with the presumed artistic failures of the film resulted in the predominant rejection of the narratives about the revolt and the Decembrists created by the film. The perceived attempts to manipulate made the majority of the audience feel annoyed, angry, frustrated and bored.

5.3. Discussing paternalism - in imaginary past and authentic present

The narrative of paternalism was universally identified by all the interviewees, although two out of ten respondents - Lev and Anna - characterised it in a positive way as didactic rather than negatively as paternalistic. Relating it to the historical context of the Decembrists revolt, most of the interviewees expressed confusion over the film's message. According to participants, the movie insisted on the possibility of reaching agreement between Decembrists and the monarchs. However, as Evgeny puts it, "Russian monarchy was not open to dialogue at any point in history". For Alisa, the attempts to iron out the differences, which were especially noticeable in the penultimate scene of the film, made the film "look like a caricature", as it ultimately made the conflict of the film pointless.

In addition to discussing the framing of the past, interviewees established connections with the present, purposefully and non-purposefully perpetuated by the film. For Kristina, the story "once again confirmed that history is cyclical", as, according to her, the state in present-day Russia "just tries to eliminate what does not fit into the big picture". Drawing on the feeling of being manipulated, which stemmed both from the assumptions about the film and engagement with its narrative, the majority of the interviewees highlighted that *Union of Salvation* was trying to send them "a clear message" about acceptable forms of the dissent in present-day Russia.

I think that this was a certain message from a fairly young part of the population who study at universities, who are very interested, who form the civil society in the rudiment that we now have, and this is a serious message to them that no events

should be forced, that everything will be decided, that educated, knowledgeable people are already in their places, and that everything will be decided. There is no need to interfere. This is a very bad message (Alisa).

We must sit and be silent. If, of course, you can do something, you should come to pay homage, bow and say "father tsar, we have such an idea, look at it." Most likely, the tsar will tell you to get lost, and you must agree with this. And do not try to achieve a better life (Dmitry).

While most of the interviewees simply rejected the paternalistic idea of the film, stating that they disagree with it, Elya explained that to her the message of the film seemed threatening, describing it as a warning being sent to anyone who opposed people in power. What is more, Dmitry and Elya highlighted the powerlessness they felt after watching the film and making the connection between the past and the present.

I feel sad about it because you feel a direct parallel. If they wanted to show that the state was like this 200 years ago, and we see such a parallel with this film, with the history of 200 years ago, does it mean that nothing changed in 200 years? It's so sad. This is a moment when you feel utterly discouraged (Elya).

Maybe we are destined to live under a dictator? 200 years ago it didn't work out, 100 years ago it worked out at first, but then the terrorists ruined everything, then 30 years ago it also seemed to go fine at first, and the power was taken by some... I don't even want to call him a terrorist... I'm not particularly sad because of this, but you think: maybe to hell with all of it? I should also leave the country (Dmitry).

6. Conclusion

Cultural memory significantly impacts on people's lives, shaping their identities and decisions. Being a dynamic phenomenon which can connect seemingly unrelated events and establish a pattern of understanding history, cultural memory is heavily influenced by media and popular culture. It is shaped by and contested through them, allowing to dissect the power dynamics that go into recollecting personal and public past within fictionalised narratives. Although cultural memory necessarily involves establishing personal relations with the past of others, its research is predominantly text-oriented, investigating what is told about the past from the top-down, largely marginalising the engagement with such recollection. At the same time, it is exactly through the combination of collective frames of remembering and personal imagination that the cultural memory is transformed and reflected upon.

This thesis project set out to examine how recollection of a particular instance of political dissent – the Decembrist revolt - is negotiated, contested, and discoursed upon in Russian popular culture. Besides the narratives about the event, present in the historical state-funded film *Union of Salvation*, the focus of the research was on the complex relationship that the audience builds with this text. The case was approached from the perspective of engagement as an empowering and unpredictable internal force, which allows audiences to interact with mediated cultural memories in complex ways, expressing their agency. To do so, the methods of film narrative analysis and semi-structured interviews were combined, with the latter building on the results of the former.

The interpretation of this engagement allowed to uncover not only the opinions viewers hold on the Decembrist revolt, but also the factors that shape their interpretation of a given text as well as their awareness of the political and economic factors that differentiate the genre of historical film in the Russian context. Therefore, the thesis contributed to the underdeveloped area of research on the crossroads between cultural memory studies and popular culture research, bringing the analysis of bottom-up understanding of Russian Imperial narratives into the field.

The question of political dissent is crucial for the present-day discussion of Russian media and popular culture context. As dozens of media outlets are shut down and media professionals as well as artists leave the country due to political threat, the tendencies of state control over dissident media are amplified exponentially. Not only does the Russian state

limit the potential for dissent, but it also attempts to shape the recollection of it, which is supposed to become part of the cultural memory and thus premeditate interpretations of political resistance in the future. This is attempted through the production of state-funded historical cinema which depicts the Decembrist revolt, a well-known event from a distant past that before 2019 was largely absent from active circulation and thus belonged to the memory archive.

The film analysis of *Union of Salvation* made explicit the narratives about the Decembrist revolt that are created in the film. Predominantly, the film characterised Decembrists as disunited and callously ambitious, omitting the development of the relationships between rebels and several years of their activity, during which the ideas of the movement were formulated. Omission and absence are the key characteristics of the narrative structure of *Union of Salvation*, with the picture heavily employing flashbacks and flashforwards, as well as on-screen text explanations in order to avoid showing large important periods of time or visually contextualising socio-political realities of the era. Another technique that shapes the narratives of the film is the repetition of similar scenes. It was applied to sustain the narrative of the mercifulness of people in power, with authorities persistently and peacefully discouraging the Decembrists from rebelling.

The interviews revealed that while engaging with the narratives of *Union of Salvation*, the audiences largely rejected ideas proposed by the film, basing their negative engagement with the picture on the pre-existing knowledge of - and strong opinion on - the event itself. In addition to that, the understanding of the interpretive nature of the historical film genre, as well as the expectation of manipulation from a state-funded Russian production, further set the majority of the research participants against the film. Due to the bias towards state-sponsored cinematography and predominantly positive opinion on the Decembrists and the Decembrist revolt, the participants of the research largely focused on what is absent from the narrative, approaching the film critically and analytically. In other words, the analysis of the interviews highlighted the reflexive approach of the audience towards the cultural memory, produced through state-influenced popular culture texts.

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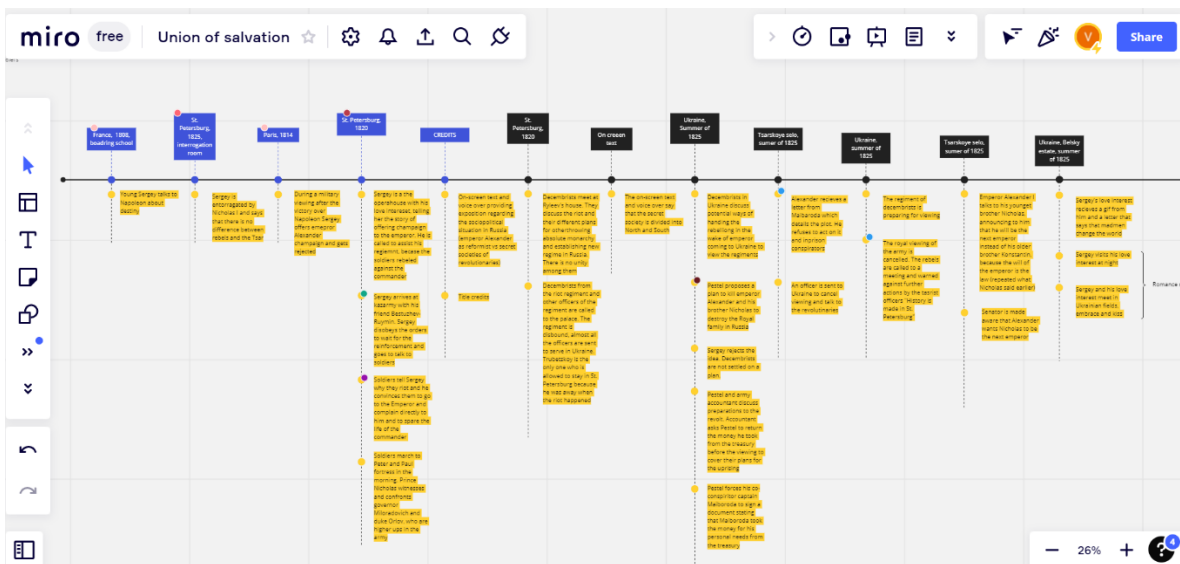
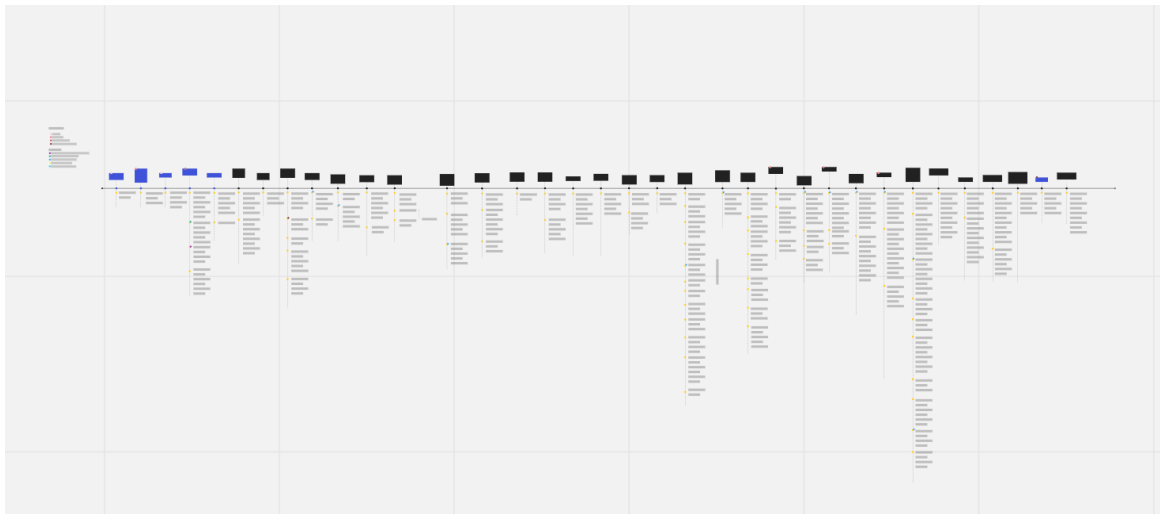
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Appendices

Appendix 1. Screenshots of the plot segmentation



Narrative techniques	
●	Flashback
●	Flashforwards
●	Regular narration time
●	Fantasy / dream or imagination
Patterns of plot	
●	Decembrists having rapport with Russian soldiers
●	Decembrists disobeying higher ups
●	Decembrists being shown mercy
●	Decembrists being corrupt
●	Decembrists being disorganized

Appendix 2. The interview guide in Russian

I. Знания о восстании Декабристов

- . Когда и где ты впервые узнал про декабристов?
- A. Кем, по твоему мнению, были декабристы?
- B. Что ты лично думаешь о декабристах?
- C. Каков, по-твоему, публичный образ декабристов?
 - 0. Как люди их вспоминают обычно?
 - 1. Что ты думаешь про этот публичный образ?
 - 2. Какое значение декабристы и их восстание имеют сегодня?
- D. Какие произведения - кроме “Союза спасения” - ты ещё смотрел или читал о декабристах?
 - 0. Если ничего не читал и не смотрел, почему?

II. Спектр вовлеченности в “Союз спасения”

- . Что мотивировало тебя впервые посмотреть “Союз спасения”?
 - 0. Какие ожидания у тебя были о фильме перед тем, как его посмотреть? Насколько эти ожидания себя оправдали?
- A. Что ты в целом думаешь о фильме?
- B. Как много раз ты смотрел “Союз спасения”?
 - 0. Почему столько раз?
- C. Как ещё ты взаимодействовал с фильмом помимо его просмотра?

III. Жанр исторического кино и репрезентация истории

- . Какой, по твоему мнению, жанр у “Союза спасения”?
- A. Фильм на историческую тематику. Как бы ты описал кино на историческую тематику / историческое кино? Какие у него характеристики?
 - 0. Чего ты ожидаешь от фильма в историческом жанре?
- B. Как, на твой взгляд, исторические фильмы работают с прошлым?
- C. Насколько исторически точным, по твоему мнению, должны быть исторические фильмы? Объясни свою позицию?
- D. Как прошлое и настоящее, по твоему мнению, соотносятся в историческом фильме?
- E. Как “Союз спасения” вписывается в жанр исторического кино?

IV. Вовлеченность в темы фильма

- . Давай поговорим о сюжете фильма. О чём, на твой взгляд, этот фильм?

- 0. Насколько подробный, по твоему мнению, у фильма сюжет?
 - 1. Что бы ты хотел бы увидеть включенным в фильм/исключенным из него? Можешь объяснить свою позицию?
 - 2. Насколько, на твой взгляд, этот фильм соответствует действительности?
- A. Давай поговорим о главных героях фильма.
- 0. Кто, по твоему мнению, главные герои фильма?
 - 0. Как ты определил, что они главные герои?
 - 1. Как эти персонажи представлены в фильме?
 - 0. Что ты думаешь о том, как они там представлены?
 - 2. Какие второстепенные персонажи произвели на тебя наибольшее впечатление?
 - 3. Кто главный злодей / главные злодеи, антагонисты в фильме?
 - 0. Что делает их антагонистами?
- B. Давай поподробнее поговорим о декабристах в фильме. Каковы основные цели у декабристов в фильме?
- 0. Какая мотивация у декабристов в фильме?
 - 1. Насколько легко понять мотивацию декабристов в фильме?
 - 2. Что ты думаешь об их целях и мотивации, представленных в фильме?
- C. На твой взгляд, каковы отношения между декабристами в фильме?
- 0. Что ты думаешь о том, как представлены эти отношения?
- D. Что ты думаешь о действиях декабристов в фильме?
- 0. Что ты думаешь и чувствуешь по поводу того, что их действия представлены таким образом?
 - 1. Как фильм демонстрирует само восстание?
- E. Как в фильме представлена власть?
- F. Что ты думаешь о том, как в фильме представлена власть?
- 0. Каковы, по твоему мнению, в фильме отношения между властью и декабристами?
 - 1. Что ты думаешь о таком представлении отношений между декабристами и властью?
- G. Как ты думаешь, в чем посыл фильма?

0. Как Союз Спасения связан с сегодняшним днем? На твой взгляд, что фильм говорит о сегодняшнем дне?

1. Как ты относишься к такому месседжу фильма?

Н. Что ты думаешь о декабристах после просмотра фильма?

V. Последний, главный вопрос

. Хочешь что-нибудь добавить к тому, что уже сказал?

Appendix 3. The interview guide in English

I.Prior knowledge about the Decembrist revolt

- . When and where did you first learn about the Decembrist revolt?
- A. Who, would you say, were the Decembrists?
- B. What do you personally think about the Decembrists?
- C. What, in your opinion, is their public image? How are they usually remembered?
 - 0. What do you think about this public image?
- D. What other texts about the Decembrist revolt, besides Union of Salvation, did you engage with?
 - 0. *If they have not watched or read anything else, ask what is the reason for it.*

II.Spectrum of engagement with the film Union of Salvation

- . What motivated you to watch Union of Salvation in the first place?
 - 0. What did you expect of the film prior to watching it? To what extent were these expectations fulfilled?
- A. What do you generally think about the film?
- B. How many times have you watched Union of Salvation?
 - 0. Explain, what is the reason for watching the film only once / multiple times?
- C. How did you engage with the movie beyond watching it?

III.Historical film genre and representation of history

- . What is the genre of Union of Salvation?
- A. How would you describe a historical film? What are its main characteristics?
 - 0. What do you expect from a historical film?
- B. How, in your opinion, historical films deal with the past?
- C. How historically accurate do you expect the historical films to be? Explain your position
- D. What is the relationship between past and present in a historical film?
- E. How does Union of Salvation fit into the characteristics of historical film?

IV.Engagement with themes in the film

- . Let's talk about the story and plot of the film. What, in our opinion, is the film about?
 - 0. How comprehensive, in your opinion, is the plot in the film?

1. What would you like to see included in the film / excluded from it? Can you explain your position?
 2. How authentic, in your opinion, is the film?
- A. Let's talk about the main characters of the film
0. Who do you think are the main characters in the movie?
 0. How did you decide that they are the main characters?
 1. How are these characters presented in the film? What do you think about this presentation?
 2. Who are the main antagonists of the film?
 0. What makes them antagonists?
- B. What are the main goals of Decembrists in the film?
0. What is the motivation of Decembrists in the film?
 1. How easy is it to understand the motivation of Decembrists in the film?
 2. What do you feel about their goals and motivations, as presented in the film?
- C. In your opinion, what is the relationship between Decembrists in the film?
0. What do you think about the way their relationship is represented?
- D. What do you think about the actions of Decembrists in the film?
0. What do you think and feel about their actions being presented this way?
 1. How does the film demonstrate the revolt itself?
- E. How, in your opinion, does the film present people in power?
0. What is the relationship between people in power and the Decembrists in the film?
 1. What do you think about the fact that their relationship are presented this way?
- F. What do you think is the message of the film?
0. How is Union of Salvation connected to the present day? In your opinion, what does the film say about the present day?
 1. What do you think about this message?
- G. What do you think about Decembrists after watching the film?

V.Final question

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 4. Consent form in Russian

В данной дипломной работе я буду исследовать нарративы о восстании декабристов, которые присутствуют в фильме “Союз Спасения”, вышедшем в прокат в 2019 году. Вы станете участником исследования аудитории фильма.

Я задам вам вопросы о том, что вы думаете о сюжете и стиле фильма, его исторической достоверности и продвигаемых им идеях.

Интервью будет длиться около 60 минут. Вы имеете право не отвечать на вопросы, которые вызовут у вас дискомфорт, и вы также сможете прекратить интервью в любое время. Я бы хотела провести аудио- и / или видеозапись этого интервью. Это будет сделано только с вашего согласия. Запись нашего разговора будет доступна только мне и вам. Она будет расшифрована вручную и затем проанализирована и сравнена с другими интервью. Собранная информация будет использована для завершения моего дипломного проекта в Лундском университете.

Я гарантирую, что вы не будете идентифицированы по имени в выводах, полученных в результате этого интервью, и ваше участие в проекте останется конфиденциальным. Вся информация, которая может раскрыть вашу личность, будет удалена из расшифровки интервью и финального текста дипломной работы.

Если вы согласны на участие в интервью, пожалуйста, заполните форму ниже вручную или в электронном виде и отправьте мне обратно, по электронной почте, написав «Я даю согласие на интервью» в письме.

Возраст

Пол

Род деятельности

Я соглашаюсь на проведение и запись интервью

Appendix 5. Consent form in English

In this thesis, I will explore the narratives about the Decembrist revolt that are present in the 2019 film Union of Salvation. You will become a participant in the study of the film's audience.

I will ask you questions about the plot and style of the film, its historical accuracy and the ideas it promotes.

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You have the right not to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable, and you can also end the interview at any time. I would like to record this interview. This will only be done with your consent. The recording of our conversation will be available only to me and you. It will be transcribed by hand and then analyzed and compared with other interviews. The information collected will be used to complete my thesis project at Lund University.

I guarantee that you will not be identified by name in the findings of this interview and your participation in the project will remain confidential. All information that could reveal your identity will be removed from the transcript of the interview and the final text of the thesis.

If you agree to participate in the interview, please fill out the form below manually or electronically and send it back to me by any means you find convenient. Please check the box next to “I consent to participation and agree to the record of the interview”.

Age

Gender

Occupation

I consent to participation and agree to the record of the interview

Appendix 6. Information regarding sampling

N	Name in the paper	Age	Gender	Occupation	Date of interview	Length of interview	Special notes
1	Ivan	25	M	Dentist	10.03.2022	01:17:57	Pilot interview. Most questions worked, needed to change the order for clarity.
2	Alisa	22	F	Student	12.03.2022	01:26:34	Watched the film multiple times, asking her friends to watch the film with her. Believes that the story lacks clarity and consistency.
3	Anna	26	F	Architect	12.03.2022	01:24:50	Disapproves of the revolt and any unlawful action against the state. Empathizes with Decembrists and their fate. Believes in didactic potential of historical films, thinking that they should be as authentic and

							factually correct as possible.
4	Alexander	22	M	Student	13.03.2022	01:32:53	Significant historical and political interest in the Decembrist revolt. Read program documents of Decembrists, read about Decembrists and their revolt before watching a movie. Feels strong negative emotions towards the film, describing it as a film that is “fundamentally against freedom”.
5	Elya	22	F	Tutoring school administrator	14.03.2022	01:34:30	Felt unsafe after the film, as in her opinion it was trying to scare her into not protesting.
6	Lev	23	M	Bank clerk	21.03.2022	01:29:38	Outlier - sides with the tsarist forces, not Decembrists.

							Believes that the film is completely truthful. Sees the film almost as a historical document.
7	Marina	24	F	International relations analyst	26.03.2022	01:22:24	Said that for here Decembrists first and foremost are associated with their wives, who followed them to Siberia. Was disappointed not to see the wives in the film but explained it because “no educated woman would be dedicated to the types of men presented in the film”.
8	Kristina	23	F	Lawyer	27.03.2022	01:22:05	Was not knowledgeable on the topic of Decembrists, felt confused after the film because of that.

9	Evgeniy	24	M	Lawyer	27.03.2022	01:47:51	Russian history geeks, specifically into the history of the 19th century. Read a lot of literature on Decembrists before watching the film, but was disappointed by historical inconsistencies. Felt annoyed and sad at the film's attempt to manipulate his opinion.
10	Dmitry	24	M	Marketing specialist	29.03.2022	01:33:00	Strongly oppositional, routinely participates in protests and has strong political views. Draws parallels between protests of today and the revolt: sees the revolt as initially a peaceful protest. Disapproves of the film.

11	Pavel	24	M	Podcast creator	30.03.2022	01:33:47	Does not believe that the film is a propaganda because of the movie's inability to create any strong feelings. Talks more about the incompetence of the film, rather than its propagandistic potential.
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Appendix 7. Open coding example

1	V: Супер, все, запись пошла. Еще раз большое спасибо что согласилась поучаствовать в интервью. Я буду следить за времени, чтобы мы не говорили слишком долго, не хочу держать тебя слишком долго. Давай начнем вообще с твоих знаний твоей памяти о декабристах. Кем по твоему мнению были декабристы?	
2	P: Ну, по мнению исходят из исторического контекста это в первую очередь были представители отечественной аристократии, которые после наблюдения за иностранным опытом управления государственного решили что было бы правильно внедрить такие практики в российских реалиях, и к сожалению их стремления не увенчались успехом, и они стали скорее таким символом, нежели действительно повлияли на какие-то исторические перспективы.	аристократы, которые хотели внедрить западные практики управления сожалеет, что не получилось
4	V: А чего конкретно они хотели?	декабристы стали символом, нежели повлияли на ход событий
6	P: По моему мнению они в первую очередь стремились добиться коллективного управления в российской империи и наверное именно это стало таким своеобразным камнем преткновения потому что вопросы коллективного управления и вообще сосредоточенность на организации государственного аппарата во многом не затрагивали или очень опосредованно касались вопросов жизни народа, вопрос системы общественной жизни, экономического устройства. То есть основной акцент был в первую очередь сделан на методике управления и это наверное стало такой печальной стороной этого вопроса по моему мнению.	Декабристы хотели коллективного управления
7	V: Почему они именно восстали как тебе кажется?	
8	P: Мне кажется потому что невозможность реального участия в государственных вопросах кроме как какие-то придворные интриги, такое опосредованное влияние в рамках варьирования определенных вопросов не давали этих возможностей и такая часть общества видевшая возможность силового решения вопроса, вилливати уместность подобных решений на опыте иностранных государств опять же приняла решение о том что в российских реалиях такое тоже возможно.	невозможность реального участия в государственных вопросах мотивировала восстать
9	V: Что ты лично думаешь о декабристах?	иностраный опыт вдохновил на восстание
11	P: Мне кажется что это безусловно значимые исторические личности, значимые они с той точки зрения что в целом выступить и осознанно обозначить позицию несогласия с существующим порядком правления это всегда безусловно очень серьезное решение, которое требует определенной доли мужества и мне кажется что их роль на самом деле порой преуменьшает, порой преувеличивается, но отрицать что ее нет нельзя. Они развили как часть тех территорий куда их сослали, они сформировали определенное культурное наследие и в целом они обозначили что бунт аристократии, бунт такой казался бы пресыщенной части общества он тоже возможен.	нельзя отрицать роль декабристов
12	V: А можем теперь поконкретнее разбить что ты думаешь об их целях?	выступить с несогласием требует мужества
13	P: Ну, мое мнение они хотели добиться в первую очередь получения возможности участия в вопросах государственного управления, т есть им хотелось под своим именем, под своими какими-то позициями высказывать свое мнение, принимать	показали, что бунт элит возможен
15		Хотели иметь возможность участвовать в государственном управлении

Appendix 8. Refined descriptive codes example

Поддерживает цели декабристов

- сожалеет, что не получилось
- нельзя отрицать роль декабристов
- выступить с несогласием требует мужества
- Соплидарна с их целями
- Разделение власти всегда хорошо
- Печально, что хорошая цель не была достигнута
- Печально и грустно от их судьбы
- Ассоциируешь себя, потому что тоже желаешь блага стране
- Сопереживает декабристам, которые идут до конца

Понимает, почему их судьба закончилась так

- В условиях монархии казнь была малой кровью
- Вынужденная кровь, которую платит любая революция

Видит символическую силу декабристов

- декабристы значимы как символ несогласия, символ жажды изменений
- декабристы значимы не из-за результатов
- декабристы стали символом, нежели повлияли на ход событий
- Впечатляющий пример для молодежи, интересующейся публичным управлением

Суть декабристов - в стремлении к коллективному управлению

- аристократы, которые хотели внедрить западные практики управления
- Декабристы хотели коллективного управления
- невозможность реального участия в государственных вопросах мотивировала восстать
- иностранный опыт вдохновил на восстание
- показали, что бунт элит возможен
- Хотели иметь возможность участвовать в государственном управлении
- Мало бы поменялось для простых граждан
- Акцент был на публичном управлении

Расширенные знания о декабристах

- Впервые узнала в школе
- Не вызвало изначально интерес - не было фактуры
- Изучала декабристов в университете
- Читала программные документы
- Смотрела Звезда пленительного счастья
- Более осознанное понимает их цели

Считает публичный образ не устоявшимся

- Понимает динамику образа декабристов
- Сейчас более спорный образ

Appendix 9. Intra-interview coding comparison example

Alisa	Alexander	Dmitry	Elya	Evgeny	Lev	Anna	Kristina	Marina	Pavel
		Не сразу заинтересовался декабристами	Не сразу заинтересовалась декабристами						Знаком с декабристами благодаря художественной литературе
Поддерживает цели декабристов	Цели вызывают уважение	Одобрят цели	Одобрят цели декабристов	Считает героями и одобряет идеи	Не одобряет цели декабристов	Относится к декабристам нейтрально	Поддерживает цели декабристов	Поддерживает цели декабристов	Поддерживает цели декабристов
		Сожалеет, что у декабристов не получилось	Сожалеет, что у декабристов не получилось		Сочувствует власти				
Понимает, почему их судьба закончилась так		Сочувствует судьбе декабристов		Жалеет и сочувствует дальнейшей судьбе	Считает их казнь оправданной и поддерживает	Не поддерживает, но понимает их казнь	Сочувствует судьбе декабристов	Сочувствует судьбе декабристов	Не поддерживает, но понимает их казнь
				Не					