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Vladimir Sappak's Humanism on Soviet TV

Pavel Khazanov



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## **Vladimir Sappak's Humanism on Soviet TV**

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**Abstract**

In his writings, the first Soviet critic of television, Vladimir Sappak (1921-1961) associates the new mass medium with a political vision typical of Soviet intelligentsia in the Thaw era: the project of transcendence of Stalinism and its legacy. This project had to be pursued within the context of Soviet Party censorship, which made it difficult to articulate what post-Stalinism would entail. My paper analyzes Sappak's understanding of television's sincerity— a key attribute of the medium, according to his influential monograph, *Television and Us* (1963, published posthumously). I argue that Sappak's TV sincerity in fact articulates an understanding of Soviet humanism, which, I claim, was a culturally important post-Stalinist mass ideology, whose boundaries and effects were negotiated in a contest between the Party state, the creative and scientific intelligentsia, and the urbanized, educated, TV-watching Soviet consumer masses.

**Keywords**

USSR, Thaw, Sincerity, Intelligentsia, Destalinization

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In 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote down his favorite joke: “What’s purple and hums? An electric grape. Why does it hum? Because it doesn’t know the words.” The context of this joke is *Understanding Media*, McLuhan’s most well-known monograph, which tries to extract the social meaning of the rise of modern mass media, television in particular. Without going too deeply into McLuhan’s analysis, in the most general terms his fairly extravagant argument runs as follows. Western civilization’s collective sensorium has for a long time been shaped by the alphabet and by the moveable type. McLuhan claims that both of these mediums have encouraged rational thinking, an understanding of the world through causal processes, and the extension of uniform patterns of administration through time and space. However, with the invention of electric media, a new day is upon us. With TV in particular, it is no longer thoughts or ideas that get transmitted instantly across space, but actual images and sounds of human beings. As a result, our collective relationships are changing— we are no longer as interested in engaging with each other on the level of reason or words. Rather, modern mass media, like television, forces us to rediscover a way of communicating based on a deep level of awareness of each other’s human presence. To quote McLuhan himself, “The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology.”<sup>1</sup> And the future, in McLuhan’s view, is “the global village,” a connected world, in which all of us instantly recognize the humanity of everyone else plugged into the cybernetic medium, and this ecstasy of pan-human recognition leads to the reign of a new kind of social harmony. McLuhan’s “electric grape” speaks to this utopian ideal. The electric grape doesn’t know the words, but it hums in a friendly fashion. Soon, all of us also will be able to “hum” together in harmony, and words will become unnecessary.

In the Soviet Bloc, McLuhan’s favorite joke probably would not have been funny. That is not to say that late Soviet society didn’t like to see genuine-looking, integral personalities on television or in movies or in books. On the contrary, a constant performance of subjective sincerity and emotional depth was a mainstay of late Soviet culture, especially in the 1960s. It is also not to say that Soviets did not like jokes. After all, it was precisely in the 1960s and 1970s that the *anekdot* became the go-to form of pithy social commentary circulating in the Soviet public and private spheres. However, the purpose of the Soviet *anekdot* (especially the political kind of *anekdot*, but possibly all of them) was to try to say something in a quasi-public fashion, in the context of a censorship regime that usually made people feel that saying meaningful things in public was prohibited. In other words, the presumption of the late Soviet *anekdot* was *not* that “we don’t know the words,” but rather that we *do* know them, but aren’t fully allowed to speak. If there is one Soviet joke in particular that captures both the essence of the late Soviet *anekdot* and the essence of late Soviet censorship, I think it is the joke about a man dressed up in a drab Red Army coat, giving out leaflets on the Red Square, sometime in the 1970s. Passersby assume that these are protest leaflets, pick them up, but quickly note that these are blank sheets of paper. The soldier responds, ‘why write? Everyone already knows everything.’

Still, perhaps there *are* some similarities between the Western electric grape and the Soviet dissident. What if there is something about the post-War TV era, both in the East and the West, that made mass non-verbal communication possible, or— to be more precise— that made it *feel* like such communication was possible, or *should* have been possible? To get at what I am trying to understand, here I explicate a Soviet text on Television, produced virtually at the exact same time as McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*— Vladimir Sappak’s *Television and Us*. Sappak’s observations about effective TV programming often converge with McLuhan. He, too, observes that what McLuhan calls “cool” sincerity of personality works better on TV than in what McLuhan calls “hot” rational discourse.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Sappak, just as McLuhan, imagines TV as part of a new political utopia, in which the performance and consumption of the idea of individual humanity through mass media promises a

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1994), 5

<sup>2</sup> See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22-32

future of social harmony. The difference between Sappak and McLuhan, however, has to do with the explicit political stakes of arguing this point in their respective societies in the 1960s. McLuhan's allegiance to this or that American (or Canadian) political agenda is quite difficult to pin down. For Sappak, however, the cool sincerity of television is tied to a much more concrete, historically localizable late Soviet political vision. Namely, he sees television as a part of the project of transcendence of Stalinism and its legacy, within the context of Soviet social and political conditions that made it rather difficult to articulate what post-Stalinism would look like. Mostly leaving McLuhan out of the picture, the present paper discusses this late Soviet dynamic. I argue that Sappak's understanding of television sincerity is really an articulation of Soviet humanism, which, in my view was a post-Stalinist mass ideology, whose boundaries and effects were negotiated in a contest between the Party state, the creative and scientific intelligentsia, and the urbanized, educated, TV-watching Soviet consumer masses.

*Television and Us* was written by Sappak between 1960 and 1961. He was between 39 and 40 years old at the time, a theater critic by profession, and chained to his bed because of a rare and lethal blood cancer. To pass the days, Sappak watched a lot of early Soviet television, and wrote four essayistic "chats" about it. One of these would be published in *Novy mir* during his lifetime, in 1960. It would then be reprinted in 1963, along with the others, in Sappak's posthumous monograph. The impact of Sappak's text on the Soviet TV industry was quite significant; for decades, it was a must-read part of the curriculum for everyone who went to work in Soviet TV.

I would like to highlight two interlocking vectors in Sappak's book: 1) Sappak's understanding of the social conditions of Soviet television; and 2) Sappak's engagement with the TV medium – namely, TV's formal limitations, the kind of performance that TV requires from its performers, the kind of engagement that TV elicits from its audience. On the first point, Sappak is sensitive to the social transformations of the new, post-Stalin era. For him, the most important transformation is the rise of privacy as the new generic mode of social being. Sappak points out that in the 1920 and 1930s "we wouldn't have had time for television," because in those decades, collective being was absolutely prioritized over private affairs. Today, meanwhile, Sappak sees a sign of the times in a telling social anecdote about a contemporary communal apartment:

nine rooms,  
nine families,  
nine TV sets.

Evening comes. Doors are locked. People sit behind their walls. Nine TV sets are working at full blast.<sup>3</sup>

The image of the mass crowd, which for Sappak had epitomized the early Soviet decades, has now given way to the image of the far larger TV network, comprised of people behind closed doors, watching the same shows. In Sappak's view, this new virtual collective coheres around ideal TV heroes, such as the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and the pianist Van Cliburn. In other words, if the crowd had been a hero of the 1920s and 1930s, then the hero of the Thaw is the ideal human personality, around whom a televised mass communion takes place. Now, we might object that there weren't that many TV sets around in 1960 and that neighbors of communal apartments would often get together to watch one family's set, rather than locking themselves behind closed doors. Even so, it is quite telling that this image of TV-watching privacy is what Sappak picks up as the "typical" situation in the USSR of his day, to use the old Stalinist parlance. Apparently, the idea of family privacy captured in his quote is consistent with the state's hopes for this era.

Now, the second vector: what are the formal effects of TV as a medium, and how do they determine what makes for good television? Unsurprisingly, Sappak's most important category of thought in this regard is sincerity. As we well know, sincerity was *the* buzzword of the cultural Thaw

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Sappak, *Televidenie i my: chetyre besedy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1988), available online: <http://www.eartist.narod.ru/text12/85.htm>

in the USSR, and it can be difficult to track what precisely it meant in various contexts. Since what I am doing here is basically a critique of ideology, I think it is helpful to approach sincerity as an ideological discourse, and to make sense of it by giving a genealogy of this concept within Sappak's particular context. Sappak clearly inherits his understanding of sincerity from its original articulation by Vladimir Pomerantsev's "On Sincerity in Literature" – the bombshell piece from December 1953 in Tvardovsky's *Novy mir*, which according to intelligentsia accounts launched the Thaw.

In a nutshell, Pomerantsev had positioned sincerity in terms of a juxtaposition between subjective and objective truth. Describing a problem with a certain bad recent novel, Pomerantsev pointed out that there was nothing wrong per se with this given novel's ideas. The problem was, rather, that it was boring and artless:

Here everything seems correct, even though from an artistic point of view everything is absolutely incorrect. We do not feel the soul of the author here, we do not recognize his own thoughts. We are reading only that which is too well-known, that which is not permeated by an emotional basis [*emotsional'nyy nachialom*], and which is on top of that also fertilized with the protagonist's cult of personality.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the novel is flat. It presents the right message, but that message is "too well-known" and it is expressed through a protagonist who is a cardboard cutout, a "cult" of himself.

Pomerantsev saw realistic renderings of human psychology as a way to improve party-approved, "objectively" legitimate Soviet socialist realist writing. Keep all of the "objective" virtues of Soviet texts – keep the party-mindedness, keep the idea-mindedness. Just add more truthful depictions of the complex internal world of literary heroes. Under such limitations, would such truthful depictions be possible? Pomerantsev clearly thought they were, and the reason he thought so, I think, had to do with the kind of colleagues he mixed with. Pomerantsev was writing his piece for a journal overseen by Tvardovsky and Igor Sats, both of whom had been friends and colleagues of the philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Lifshitz. Lifshitz, for his part, became active in the 1930s, when he collaborated with Georg Lukács, as well as Igor Sats and other likeminded thinkers, who together were known as *the Current* (*Techenie*). The Current's primary activity during that decade was literary criticism, published in the journal *Literaturnyi kritik*. The Current's basic program was an attempt to renegotiate socialist realism. They argued that socialist realist literature would only be any *good* if it depicted a painful, tragic, non-schematic, deeply psychological process of socialist subjectivization. They argued that the tragic mode of writing was the only appropriate, truthful register for depicting such "typical" Soviet subjectivities of the 1930s. They championed the author Andrei Platonov as an ideal socialist realist writer for this reason. Meanwhile, in their conception, Stalinist art (which of course they never explicitly called "Stalinist") was the opposite of this sort of subjective truth; they saw the officially celebrated culture of this period as so many optimistic, highly formulaic, ritualistic plots in which cardboard characters would easily overcome their flaws, acquire appropriate consciousness through helpful party guidance, and predictably become better workers, engineers, military leaders, and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

We can see the relationship between the Current's ideas and Pomerantsev's article. Already since the 1930s there had existed a coding of some kind of politically-resistant, but still avowedly socialist realist perspective on literature, a hope for an alternative kind of socialist realism. I think it is this position that was reactivated with Pomerantsev's sincerity. Subsequently, Thaw-era culture further developed it. It is noteworthy that some basic formulations of Lifshitz and Lukács became quite mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s– particularly their emphasis on tragedy, on anti-monumentalism, and on deep subjectivity. Paradigmatic here are the various famous 1960s film and theater roles of the

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Pomerantsev, "Ob iskrennosti v literature," *Novyi mir* 12 (1953), 218, available online: <http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LITRA/MEMO/POMER.HTM>

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between Lifshitz's *Techenie* and Platonov, see Pavel Khazanov, "Learning to Have the Courage of Ceaseless Happiness": High Stalinism and Socialist Subjectivity of Mikhail Lifshitz's *Current* and Andrei Platonov's *Happy Moscow*." *The Russian Review*. Forthcoming, 2018.

actor Innokentii Smoktunovskiy. A version of this position is visible in Sappak's discussion of TV sincerity.

Sappak approaches TV sincerity at first through some empirical observation, by describing who looks bad on TV. Very quickly, he discovers that TV makes it thoroughly impossible to appear authentic, while spewing "official socialism." To prove the point, Sappak goes through a long list of failed Soviet TV appearances. Though he generally likes the Moscow Central TV network host Valentina Leontieva, he points out that she looks silly when she launches into a scripted, officious agriculture report: "the words 'tractor,' 'silo,' 'from every pig' all sound artificial and forced."<sup>6</sup> To give another example; Sappak ridicules how supposedly random passersby tell the camera that they're very happy because they've completed their factory's five-year-plan to 102%. Similarly, he thinks it's absurd when a TV broadcast shows a young woman talk about how important the Soviet elections are in her life.<sup>7</sup> All of these people seem perfectly innocuous from the standpoint of Soviet ideology. However, such modes of speaking do not work on TV. So far we are on the same ground as Pomerantsev.

Then, Sappak discusses who *does* look good on TV, and this is apparently as much a matter of viewership as it is of the TV medium and the TV personalities. This union of medium, performers and audience takes us beyond Pomerantsev's conception. So, in the opening pages of the text, Sappak mentions Gagarin and Van Cliburn. Later, he sets aside a number of pages to extol the virtues of Valentina Leontieva when she is not spewing officious jargon:

If one were to fantasize a little, it would be possible to depict that imagined conversation partner to whom Leontieva addresses herself through the screen. [He] is a smart, easygoing person, he has a sense of humor (Leontieva herself is a little ironic), and as a thoroughly modern person he values such qualities as independence of judgment, the ability to remain true to one's self in all situations.<sup>8</sup>

In the fourth chat, Sappak adds one more caveat, that Leontieva's viewers must have "an inevitable *intelligentsia quality* [неприменная *интеллигентность*]" to them.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, elsewhere Sappak points out some other ideal TV personalities:

For TV certain people are indispensable— people like Kornei Ivanovich Chukovsky, like Iraklii Andronikov, like Ehrenburg, Iutkevich, Obraztsov, Alpatov, Shklovsky— those, who not only have something to say, but who also know how to speak, nay to think in an unfettered way, freely (and this is a tremendous talent) before the lens.<sup>10</sup>

So, on the one hand, we have a young Leontieva, who is good on TV because she is *modern*, apparently like her modern Soviet "intelligentsia" viewers, all the ones mentioned earlier, sitting behind the closed doors of their apartments, enjoying the urbanized, educated lifestyle of the post-War era. And on the other hand, we have a bunch of geriatrics, who are apparently also, somehow, *modern* – after all, they have the same telegenic qualities as Leontieva!

Sappak's list of ideal TV personalities is, of course, a list of the *old* intelligentsia, still living and speaking after Stalin. Which is precisely the point. All of these people are subjectively non-Stalinist— they came of age *before* Stalin, and that's why they know how to act like real people. Moreover, modern TV as a medium, and the modern collective viewership of TV as an audience, apparently serve the old intelligentsia well. On TV, these figures can express and disseminate their "intelligentsia ethos" (to borrow Vladislav Zubok's term) among a friendly audience, comprised of a younger, more widespread, let us call it "junior intelligentsia."

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<sup>6</sup> Sappak, *Televidenie i my*: <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/88.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/87.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/86.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/88.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/86.htm>

And what exactly is that “intelligentsia ethos” about? The terms mentioned above ultimately come down to the notion of subjective truth: subjective truth is what TV as a technical medium demands, subjective truth is also what the TV audience wants to see, and subjective truth is what ideal TV personalities can successfully render. The idea of this full coincidence of medium, performer, and audience is captured in a metaphor taken from music: TV has a “perfect pitch for truth,” Sappak insists. Interestingly, the metaphor of “perfect pitch” implies both nature and nurture. Sappak himself underlines this point. On the one hand, Sappak’s favorite moments of Soviet TV are those in which life is caught unawares, or those in which the old intelligentsia figures simply speak off the cuff and seem naturally telegenic. On the other hand, when the critic describes how a good piece of “television theater” should be staged, or how a good TV host should act, Sappak offers prescriptions taken from the Stanislavsky system of realist theater acting. He emphasizes the rigorousness of theatrical training required for a quality performance on TV, and highlights especially the concept of the “secondary plane” that all TV personalities should hone. This is the notion that beyond the surface of a given character on stage, there exists a complex psychological depth, which can be guessed at, but shouldn’t be overacted. At one point Sappak wonders – does that mean that no one can really *act* on TV, or maybe vice versa, that *everyone* has to act? He notes:

Here it is as if even actors cease to be actors. [...] Or better to say that here everyone becomes a performer [артист], puts himself in the position of a performer. Even if only for five minutes, one takes upon himself the burden of an artist’s responsibility and the burden of an artist’s glory. Just as in Shakespeare, “all the world’s a stage!”<sup>11</sup>

The merger between life and art is consummated in the image of the ideal TV human. TV sincerity is achieved either through the craft of an actor or through the natural talent of an intelligentsia performer, or through the talent of a cameraman “catching life unawares.” Either way, a good outcome is when “every second of a performer’s presence on our screen is perceived within a singular complex of his human appearance and his art.” Similarly, “a public figure shows off to the public eye not only his speech, his declaration, his opinion, but also all of himself, his human appearance, his intellect, his sincerity. [...] That is what’s new, what only television can give: here the object of aesthetic reception is not the ‘image,’ but the very human being. Such as he is. [...] Without makeup.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, let us put on the table the political stakes of Sappak’s interest in television sincerity. It is clear to him, just as it was clear to everyone who had read Pomerantsev, just as it was also clear to Lifshitz and Lukàcs in the 1930s, that this whole business of sincerity, of subjective genuineness, somehow goes hand in hand with some notion of anti-Stalinism. Something about overall Soviet social and ideological conditions makes the case that the depiction of subjective truth in this society comes along with this sort of collective symbolic charge. Why? Sappak uses Russian Formalist terms to explain this phenomenon. He claims that TV, as an aesthetic medium, “estranges” everyday life and endows it with an “imagistic” quality. Sappak gives several examples. Here is one of a good TV personality:

Felix appeared on TV, [...] and suddenly this image [образ] connected within me with another one. I remembered an old friend [...]. I’ll never forget his slightly guilty smile, and the seemingly scattered gaze of his nearsighted eyes [...] In October of ’41, he volunteered for service. It was an absurd, useless, wonderful act. He was killed in the first battle. He never even fired a shot. And he’d always remain as old as Felix is today.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, Sappak also gives an example of TV’s negative imagistic power. He watches a certain “poet – a publicist, a journal editor.” This man seems good at being on TV – he acts freely, he speaks off the cuff. But Sappak immediately notices his falseness:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: <http://www.evartist.narod.ru/text12/88.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

I do not believe in his voice [...]. I do not believe his very appearance [...]. I do not believe in his smooth, worked-over words – words that are perhaps not from the ‘first official row’ but at most from the ‘fifth or seventh row,’ no less official. [...] Of course, [...] I could have already guessed at his sweet-talking careerism. But here, everything thickened up. It became apparent. It became [...] ‘imagistic.’<sup>14</sup>

For Sappak, Felix and the bad critic transcend their mere individual identities. The “TV frame” initiates the process of meaning-making, where people no longer appear simply as themselves, but as symbols, as social types. When the TV trains its eye on Felix, this young man transforms into an embodiment of recent, traumatic collective memory. When the TV shows the officious poet-critic, he turns into a symbol of Stalinism– euphemistically referred to as “careerism” here. This ordinary performer of Soviet ideology is “thickened up” by TV, he turns into an associative image of a Stalinist. In other words, art reveals the truth of the politics of the post-Stalin era, the truth that is lurking just beyond the surface of any given individual performance. Shklovskian “estrangement” elevates humdrum real life to the level of symbolism, and the symbols immediately fall into a pre-given ideological polarity. From a subject of this ideology, every individual, or event, or cultural work can be placed on a scale and asked, is it “Stalinist” or is it “anti-Stalinist”? It is this dynamic that Sappak articulates with his reflections on Soviet TV.

So, to sum up – according to Sappak, officious “Stalinists” cannot survive the TV’s probing gaze. Presumably, if you look at a person closely enough, intensely enough, with the TV lens and its technical characteristics, projected onto the private TV set and *its* technical characteristics, and in the context of the TV audience and *its* social characteristics – then possible insincerity immediately makes itself known, and will immediately tag itself as “Stalinism.” Meanwhile, under such conditions, genuine-looking, intelligent individuals will always come out looking like symbols of the modern post-Stalin collective. Moreover, all of this appears to happen without words, or quite apart from words, or even in opposition to the words uttered. Indeed, should the person on screen speak overly “Soviet” words, they are liable to appear ridiculous, like Valentina Leontieva talking about agriculture. There is a gap between the uttered text and the individual subjective image. The image is presented as more immediate, more honest, more genuinely revealing. What exactly makes it so is, to begin with, TV technology. Then, it is the performance of sincere subjectivity by the person on screen. This performance can be effortless, or it can be staged to be effortless, but it has to attain to some kind of subjective truth. And thirdly, there are the social conditions of the “typical” collective that watches TV – the collective that consumes the medium in private, that identifies with the intelligentsia figures on screen, and that for all those reasons especially enjoys watching the performance of deep subjectivity.

Sappak’s explanation for TV sincerity and its political meaning bears a lot of resemblance to the Soviet joke with which I opened this piece. There too, the right sort of performance (a man in an army coat), within the right kind of medium (the Red Square or some other highly visible public space), in the context of late Soviet social conditions (of limited public discourse), transforms a blank sheet of paper into a politically charged symbol. It is apparently the case that, quite apart from the words that late Soviet people said, they could engage in some kind of “art of living” and in that way they could occupy some proto-political position, recognize each other in it, and promote it in a public sphere that permitted some of this sort of partial communication. I am not saying that this was definitely *true*, that it was *really* happening. Rather, I’m saying that it was *truthy*– that it was *ideologically* true. In a limited way, already from the 1930s, but then most definitely from the 1950s, the discourse of sincerity, or more broadly the idea of humanist self-presentation that sincerity implied, was symbolically linked to anti-Stalinism and presupposed the possibility of collective engagement and buy-in. I am also saying that this ideology motivated both the creation and the reception of quite a bit of mainstream, Party-approved late Soviet cultural production.

To contextualize my thoughts about late Soviet sincerity and humanism in terms of recent scholarly discussions regarding the Soviet 1960s, there are two vectors of this research that interest

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

me. First, there are the theories regarding the nature of the post-Stalin state and its mode of social management. Second, there are the theories regarding the politics of the late Soviet cultural sphere. On the side of the state, the story of the Thaw is the story of Party leaders deciding to put an end to Stalin-era terror, in which they had all participated, and to which they all could just as well have fallen victim. The Party's strategy for making a clean break from this very recent, uncomfortable bloody past has recently been examined by Kevin Platt, in his study of the circulation of Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech. The Speech publicly denounced the repressions of the Stalin era, by attributing its carnage to Stalin's individual "cult of personality." However, both in its original setting at the XX Party Congress, and in local Party meetings, the public revelation of the "cult of personality" would ideally *not* be followed by lengthy discussions. As Platt points out, revelations about Stalin did not and could not have come as a surprise to a collective that had witnessed and often participated in the violent campaigns of the 1930s. So, why the apparent air of secrecy? Platt has argued that the point of Khrushchev's and later Brezhnev's policy was not to "forget" or even "repress" the bloody Stalinist legacy. Rather, the point was to establish a regime for managing collective memory, with two registers—a public and a private one:

In the wake of Khrushchev's speech and for the duration of the late-Soviet era, the dominant regime of memory demanded both knowledge *and* silence regarding collective trauma. Publicly articulated accounts of social and personal history balanced against a commonly known but generally unvoiced official account of Stalinist violence, which balanced in turn against an officially silenced base of alternative accounts circulating in nonofficial channels of communication, in private memory, in outdated texts and books on the library's shelves, in Soviet jokelore, and via dissenting voices from within or without the polity.<sup>15</sup>

Now, if we approach the origins of the Thaw from the side of Russia's literary and aesthetic culture and especially its producers, the story looks somewhat different. Quite apart from questions of collective memory, the Thaw opened up a whole slew of opportunities and challenges for the cultural elites, the intelligentsia that had been tasked with the business of producing texts, films, plays and paintings for their one and only customer and patron, the Soviet state in all of its many forms. From the perspective of the intelligentsia, the Thaw initiated a series of confrontations and accommodations between them and the state, regarding acceptable aesthetics, acceptable creative control, acceptable corporate control over intelligentsia membership, and acceptable social influence through Soviet media outlets, from print runs to TV appearances.

Sappak's text, in my view, should be read at the crossroads between these two lines of inquiry. It seemed self-evident to him to interpret a sincere TV comportment as anti-Stalinist and for that very reason also as the purview of the intelligentsia. I think he did so because the humanist comportment that he noted on TV was the lynchpin of a fraught social contract, an armistice line between the state and the intelligentsia, and, no less important, the urbanized, educated Soviet consumer masses with TVs in their increasingly private apartments, who were not only the intelligentsia's natural audience, but who were also starting to think of themselves as the intelligentsia's junior political partner. These people's collective memories and level of collective engagement had to be managed particularly gingerly, and late Soviet humanism was a way to do so. The Soviet state was not going to allow public discussions of either the past or the present, but at the same time the increasingly well-connected and educated 1960s collective had to know that some kind of collective conversation *was* taking place. Sincerity, the genuineness of subjectivities, the performance of humanism in late Soviet cultural production, would be precisely that mediating link, the mode through which the urbanized, educated Soviet masses would be able to recognize themselves as having overcome Stalinism, but without engaging in actual public speech regarding the matter.

In other words, Soviet Humanism was there to fill a crucial part of the deal regarding the management of collective memory as it has been described by Platt. Most, if not all Soviet individuals were expected to know privately about their and their relatives' Stalin-era traumas, but they were not

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Platt, "Secret Speech: Wounding, Disavowal, and Social Belonging in the USSR," *Critical Inquiry* 42 (Spring 2016), 669

supposed to “bear their wounds in front of Western enemies” in public, as Khrushchev had put it.<sup>16</sup> But to maintain this regime, some form of continual mass communication was *also* necessary. Humanism projected on TV and in many late Soviet films and books was supposed to be the medium of that communication, carrying without words, or with limited words, the message that “everyone already knows everything” and that there is *no need* to write or speak up in some more obviously dissident fashion. By performing their integral humanist personalities on screens, in theaters, in public readings and in published texts, Soviet cultural producers served as placeholders for collective memory and collective post-Stalinist identity, in lieu of more direct political communication. In this way, they would claim at least some of the social power that they sought. Meanwhile, the state would retain its measure of control, while the TV-watching public would be able to recognize that *some* things regarding the recent past or the present state of affairs *were* being signaled publicly in one way or another, so speaking up louder wouldn’t be necessary.

Let me conclude by coming back to Marshall McLuhan. In *Understanding Media*, the western theorist of television often makes clear his belief that TV media can be used as a way of managing collective emotions. At his most megalomaniacal point, McLuhan even envisions a future of *planetary* emotional control:

We are certainly coming within conceivable range of a world automatically controlled to the point where we could say, ‘Six hours less radio in Indonesia next week or there will be a great falling off in literary attention.’ Or, ‘We can program twenty more hours of TV in South Africa next week to cool down the tribal temperature raised by radio last week.’ Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Today, this quote seems silly. McLuhan’s belief in the possibility of maintaining planetary emotional equilibrium through television seems as ludicrous as his belief in planetary central banking. However, his claims clearly highlight the appeal of an ideology of depoliticization in the post-War era – the appeal of believing that grand social conflicts, including social strife in the US, or the planetary divisions of First, Second and Third World, could be overcome not through the difficult work of politics, nor through the difficult work of formulating, organizing, critiquing and reformulating compelling “grand narratives,” but through the magic of some kind of post-narrative – or should we call it “postmodern”? – cultural management. The same can be said of Soviet humanism. Soviet humanist communication “beyond words” was the ideology of a social accord, whose specifics and limits were perpetually challenged by the elites, but whose existence contributed greatly to that feeling of a stable “emotional climate” that made so many late Soviet individuals feel like “Everything Was Forever,” as Yurchak would put it. This era would, of course, end in the 1980s, when the censorship regime of “why write? Everyone already knows everything” was suspended, and when all of a sudden good Soviet humanists discovered that their shared “ethos” would no longer be sufficient for maintaining political harmony. However, in the interim, it was precisely the formula of “why write?” – underpinned by Soviet sincerity, by Soviet humanism – that both preserved and deferred the USSR’s eventual denouement.

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Platt, “Secret Speech,” 658

<sup>17</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 28

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