

REPRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL FILMS ON STREAMING PLATFORMS

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Abstract

The digital transformation of the audiovisual sector in recent years has not only reshaped the production and distribution of films but also largely transfigured the reception of films and audience engagement. This also calls for re-evaluation of the representation and promotion of historical films and classical films on digital streaming platforms. As a film producer and researcher of film reception and the paratexts of historical films, the author of the current article aims to examine how historical films and classical films (produced during the Soviet occupation period) are presented in the catalogues of Latvian streaming platforms, as well as the potential lack of contextual information and supplementary promotional materials for audiences.

The author explores the notion of gatekeepers and the shift from human curation towards AI-generated algorithm technology that curates the catalogues and frames potential viewers, thereby making an impact on the audience reception.

There is a striking difference in the way and means local and global platforms create the so-called viewing lists for viewers. However, an improved audience experience could be achieved by collaborating with historians, film critics, and experts in curating the catalogues and providing cultural and historical contexts for films for a contemporary audience.

Keywords: *historical films, classical films, film distribution, audience reception, digital streaming platforms, film curation, gatekeepers*

Introduction

Changes in the audiovisual sector as a result of digitisation technologies are bringing transformation into the audiovisual culture as a whole, which also calls for a rethinking of existing filmmaking and reception formats, distribution strategies and techniques, as well as the audience's viewing habits [Koljonen 2024]. American film historians and scholars Janet Staiger [Staiger 2021] and Barbara Klinger [Klinger 1997: 107–128] have extensively covered the importance of promotional activities towards audience reception. As the British film scholar Keith Johnston writes:

Since the earliest days through to digital marketing techniques of the 21st century, the production, distribution, and exhibition of promotional materials has run in parallel with the film industry, the elision of promotional materials and their status as an ancillary text (or paratext) is not a new phenomenon: advertising discourse did help to condition audience expectations and to establish the terms by which a film would be judged. [Johnston 2019: 643–662]

Everything that constitutes the audiovisual sector is subject to this process, including restored and previously made films that started to reappear in the distribution space – namely, the catalogues of the commercial digital streaming platforms. The arrival of restored films in the catalogue of commercial streaming platforms now follows a trend that has also emerged in all European countries in recent years, with major global sales agencies offering classics to the market.

Since the distribution of films requires an integrated reception and context, the principles of current cinema distribution strategies are also applicable to classical films. This raises the question of how these catalogues are made, selected and represented to audiences and whether curators and owners of these catalogues need to have a certain amount of knowledge and skills to provide a new context for these films to reach their audiences more accurately.

Global streaming platforms usually develop communication methods that reach their audience by creating new and personalised visual codes for each film – this is also the pattern for reviewing and analysing the representation of classical films within digital distribution. For the purpose of this paper, a case study methodology was employed to analyse how films produced during the Soviet occupation era, as well as contemporary historical films, are presented on contemporary commercial streaming platforms, focusing on specific examples of *TET Plus*¹,

¹ *Tet Plus* <https://tet.plus/> is a film and smart TV streaming platform in Latvia owned by SIA *Tet*, a technology and entertainment operator in Latvia, owned by the Republic of Latvia (51%) represented by SIA *Publisko aktīvu pārvaldītājs Posessor* and *Tilts Communications A/S* (49%), a wholly owned *Telia Company* entity. <https://view.news.eu.nasdaq.com/view?id=b197ccff0575d427eb264e13ed58f3d32&lang=en> (viewed 09.03.2025.)

Viedtelevizija.lv² and Go3³, furthermore, examining the catalogue of historical films of the global streaming platform *Netflix*. This methodology included analysing film texts available on these platforms and conducting interviews with their representatives of the Latvian streaming platforms to gain insights into the curation and contextualisation of these films. In the context of this paper, **historical films** are understood as *a fiction film showing past events or set within a historical period* [Kuhn, Westwell 2012: 205], whereas the term **classical films** refers to films produced and released during the Soviet occupation era. This classification follows the approach adopted by Latvian film researchers and historians, particularly as described by Inga Pērkone [Pērkone 2011], who draws on the concept of *classical cinema* from David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 2006]. In this framework, Latvian classical cinema is understood as a distinct aesthetic system and stylistic direction shaped by the production modes and ideological constraints of the Soviet occupation period.

Representation of Soviet occupation period films on Latvian streaming platforms

Considering the description and synopsis of how films made during the time of the Riga Film Studio (Latvian: *Rīgas kinostudija*, the state-owned enterprise governed by the state structures of the USSR, one of the largest film production entities during the Soviet occupation period 1940–1991) are represented on the commercial streaming platforms in Latvia, there are pronounced differences in the reception of the original text that comprises the idea of the film and changes in the meaning of wording of synopsis. Since filmmaking during the Soviet occupation period was subject to the language of Soviet ideology and commissioned by *Goskino* – the State Committee for Cinematography of the USSR and the Central Television of the USSR, the descriptions of some films represented on the Latvian commercial streaming platforms still contain the ideology of the Soviet occupation period, that denigrates the society of the 1930s, particularly in the context of pre-Soviet occupied Latvia when the so-called **capitalist oppression** and **class struggle** were some of

² Film and smart TV streaming platform www.viedtelevizija.lv is owned by *SIA Latvijas Mobilais Telefons*, a mobile network operator in Latvia, that is owned by *Telia Company AB* (24.5%), *Sonera Holding B.V.* (a subsidiary of *TeliaSonera*) (24.5%), the State Joint Stock Company Latvian State Radio and Television Centre (*VAS Latvijas Valsts radio un televīzijas centrs*) (23%), *SIA Tet* (23%), Republic of Latvia (5%) represented by *SIA Publisko aktīvu pārvaldītājs Posessor* <https://company.lursoft.lv/lv/latvijas-mobilais-telefons/50003050931> (viewed 09.03.2025.)

³ *Go3* <https://go3.lv/> is a film and smart TV streaming platform operated by *SIA All Media Group*, which is owned by the Lithuanian enterprise *UAB All Media Group (TV3 Group)*. *Go3* streaming platform is operating in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia <https://company.lursoft.lv/lv/all-media-group/40203071116> (viewed 09.03.2025.)

the themes represented in the films – for example, – the plot description of the film *Agrā rūsa / Early Rust*, Gunārs Cilinskis, 1979, states: “*In the early 1930s in Latvia, Elza, a poor country girl, arrives in Riga and becomes an intelligent unemployed woman*” [Tet.plus (a)].

Similarly, the streaming platforms *Go3* and *TET Plus* in Latvia offer another film made in 1969 at the Riga Film Studio – *Pie bagātās kundzes / My Wealthy Mistress*, Leonīds Leimanis, 1969, where the description of the main character states: “*The intelligent unemployed Oļģerts Kurmis, together with his friend, tramp Frīdis, seeks work with the Kalnkāja and his wife*” [Tet.plus (b), Viedtelevīzija]. The description does not indicate a period of time when the film’s story takes place. However, this is a film about the unemployment of the 1920s–30s, and the term **intelligent unemployed** is a term that would require explanation within the context of the era and the context of the making of the film itself.

Another example is the still widely popular classical TV drama *Ilgais ceļš kāpās (Long Road in the Dunes)*, Aloizs Brenčs, 1981), which was produced as a Soviet propaganda seven-part series. The narrative constructs a demeaning portrayal of pre-occupation Latvia as an independent state while simultaneously altering historical facts to align with Soviet ideological perspectives. However, the English synopsis of this film, as included in the catalogue of the digital streaming platform, does not contain any reference to these facts and is worded, as follows: “*Love and betrayal in a small fishing village in Latvia from 1930s until the Soviet time. Time before WWII, during WWII, punishment in Siberia, Soviet Union, returning home, and above all that – undying love, that still survives no matter what. And, on top of that, Marta and Arthur share their love*” [Tet.plus (c)]. The Latvian synopsis of the film, as included in the catalogue, is longer and more descriptive; the following is author’s translation of it:

Arthur is a simple fisherman; Marta is the daughter of a rich family. Love blossoms between the two, but a misunderstanding leads Marta to marry Rihards, the son of an industrialist. Although fate tries to separate them, sending each to a different part of the world – Arthur to the frontline and Marta and her husband to Germany – they keep looking for each other and their hearts long to meet again. Thinking that Arthur has fallen in battle, she stops looking for him, but one day she learns that the man she has always loved is alive. [Tet.plus (d)]

Audience reception and the need for historical contextualisation

These films from the 1970s and 1980s are, in a way, films about Latvian history. However, they were solely made following the ideological order and reasons – to produce films with negative narratives about the era preceding Soviet occupation.

A viewer unversed in the history of the Latvian cinema of the Soviet occupation period, without an extended context and knowledge of the film, might not know and understand the context of these films as they are currently presented in the catalogue of the streaming platform.

All these restored classical films are catalogued as *Latvian film* by the algorithm or curator of the streaming platforms, which would not be misleading as such, but the problem here is rather to understand whether films made in the 1970s as **modern dramas** of their time would already qualify as historical dramas in the perception of the contemporary viewer. Usually, the contemporary catalogues and descriptions of films on digital streaming platforms are developed in a very generalised manner, and it is the lack of the descriptive and contextual part of the film that, in a way, distorts the contemporary reception.

With the passage of time, these films have transitioned into documents that need recontextualisation, particularly for contemporary audiences and younger generations that lack direct experience of the Soviet occupation period. Modern audiences need contextual information to fully understand the historical aspects of these films. Therefore, promotional strategies could incorporate educational elements that explain the historical background, the socio-political environment of the Soviet occupation, and the specific events depicted in the films [Miķelsone 2024]. This could be achieved through more detailed promotional materials – synopses, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and expert commentaries available on streaming platforms.

Alongside doctoral studies and research on the reception of historical films and paratexts, the author of this paper has been working in the film industry for over twenty years as a producer of documentaries and fiction films, with a particular focus on the production and representation of historical narratives on screen (e.g., *Melānijas bronika* / *The Chronicles of Melanie*, Viesturs Kairiņš, 2016; *Emīlija. Latvijas preses karaliene* / *Emily. Queen of the Press*, Andis Miziņš, Kristīne Želve, Dāvis Šimanis 2021; *Janvāris* / *January*, Viesturs Kairiņš, 2022; *Marijas klusums* / *Maria's Silence*, Dāvis Šimanis, 2024). In addition to production, responsibilities related to the marketing and distribution of these films to Latvian audiences have also been frequently undertaken by the producer. As part of distribution planning, a key aspect of strategy has been the development of targeted paratexts – marketing communication messages and materials as well as the organisation of events aimed at curating the film's presentation and providing historical and thematic context, e.g., discussions with historians and lectures on the historical themes, protagonists and events described in the films, production of accompanying documentaries, curation of an exhibition, etc. This process plays a crucial role in shaping audience reception, illustrating how film distribution tools – such as advertising and marketing

strategies – actively contribute to the interpretative framework through which viewers engage with historical cinema.

To make classical historical films relevant to today's viewers, contemporary promotional messages should draw connections between the past and present, highlighting themes that could resonate with contemporary audiences who may find parallels with current global events. The communication strategies employed in the promotion of these films play a crucial role in shaping their contemporary cultural reception. Like the paratexts used within the theatrical marketing and distribution process, catalogue owners of digital streaming platforms should carefully consider the messages they want to convey and how these messages align with contemporary societal values. To better understand the possible technological and cultural principles and perspectives for a new presentation of classical films, it is useful to look at the practices introduced by digital platforms in global markets. In a study devoted to the current circulation patterns, Roderik Smits writes:

Online video-on-demand (VOD) platforms are reshaping the ways that films circulate in national and international markets, how they are introduced and promoted to audiences in those markets, and how audiences engage with them. Netflix, Amazon, MUBI, and many other VOD platforms are part of an online market with far-reaching implications for the breadth of films that audiences can watch. [...] There is also emerging research on the circulation of audiovisual works and the way they are introduced and promoted on VOD platforms. Such studies revolve around business strategies, cross-border circulation, platform interfaces, and audience recommendations through human curators and algorithm technology. [Smits 2022]

Gatekeepers in film distribution: Human curators and algorithms

The issues outlined above represent the fact that the way and form in which classical and historical films are represented in the catalogues of digital streaming platforms is highly dependent on their developers – the so-called gatekeepers. The contextualisation of both historical and classical films for their placement in the catalogues of digital streaming platforms could be the responsibility of these gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are important if we want to discuss and look at what kind of historical films are reaching contemporary audiences today, how, why and according to what criteria they are selected for inclusion in the catalogues of commercial digital streaming platforms. As per the Cambridge Business English Dictionary – gatekeeper is a term used in sociology, journalism and communication science to refer to a person or institution that controls the flow of information, resources or opportunities to the general public.

In the field of reception of cinema, such a gatekeeper position until recently was held by film critics, who formed lists of recommendations and reviews of films. They were concrete people, usually known by name and occupation, usually representing a media outlet. Nevertheless, alongside this format of criticism, which surely still exists today, the place of the gatekeeper of film reception is beginning to be occupied by the catalogue developers of commercial streaming platforms, who, in combination with AI-generated algorithms, are becoming the determinants of the reception fields of audiences. Unlike traditional gatekeepers in the field of film criticism or journalism, these new gatekeepers are anonymous, and the recommendation algorithms are designed in such a way that the viewer is, as if involuntarily, the compiler and recommender of their own *film list*; the anonymous gatekeeper creates a seemingly personalised approach to what is being watched, raising concerns that traditional film criticism is beginning to lose its role.

The film scholar Mattias Frey, in his extensive study on *Netflix* audience profiling and recommendation systems titled *Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste*, poses questions about whether recommender systems could endanger the careers of film critics, arts and culture journalists. He asks:

Could computers and robots usurp some of the trusted critic's and the learned professor's traditional functions? Will arts criticism become more or less a hobby, a boutique industry of human-touch curation thriving only among the monied classes, patronized by the one-percenters? [Frey 2021: 206]

He also suggests an answer to this almost rhetorical question:

Higher vistas remain for criticism. It is clear from this study that users still hunger for criticism's third-stage purpose: to deepen engagement after the film, to test opinions, to enter into an imagined dialogue about cultural value. But quick-tip listings, an important informational service that critics have long provided, may well yield further to aggregators and algorithms. [Frey 2021: 206]

The role of promotional paratexts and marketing

As marketing, publicity and critical reception have long been recognised as influencing factors of the film reception by wider audience, in the time of subscription VOD triumph over other distribution channels – it is important to implement wider studies exploring the ways how platforms, while acting as gatekeepers in the choice of selection and differentiation of their catalogue, offer films to audiences.

Descriptive synopsis, trailers, posters, or selected stills of the film are the main tools used for promotional activities on platforms. The gatekeepers of VOD platforms, combined with AI-generated algorithms, now constitute a field of audiovisual culture

that leaves the choice, evaluation, self-sufficiency or lack of knowledge to the viewers themselves and, at the same time, raises the question of whether and how putting classical historical film unit in a new context gives the films a new meaning and context. Thus, it can be argued, that the collaboration between critics working in traditional media and the vast catalogue field of digital platforms creates untapped opportunities for film historians and critics as new distribution strategies force a new restructuring of the context. If we want the content of local streaming platforms to be competitive with global players, it is essential to direct this vector not only towards increasing the number of film titles in the catalogue but also towards creating reception tools that shape and create context, and that demands an increasingly personalised approach.

Lists and cultural patterns – insights from Umberto Eco

The catalogues of films developed by streaming platforms that act as gatekeepers also allow us to talk about this cultural-historical phenomenon of **lists**, which the writer, philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco discusses in his book *Infinity of Lists*. What are these visual lists? Like a **painting**, revealing certain images to the gaze, they also allow us to guess what lies behind it all. These personalised lists of film visuals, in the form of film catalogues, are most often presented in photographs, adapted to the consumer by an algorithm known only to the streamer. The catalogues of films on streaming platforms are in line with the Western cultural tendency, described by Umberto Eco, to systematise and create lists, which leads us to assess whether there is any comprehensible regularity in these lists produced by the algorithms of streaming platforms. Lists encapsulate this desire of culture to strive for orderliness, even if its creation is and remains the sole responsibility of platform developers.

In the chapter devoted to Mass Media Lists, Eco calls the Internet the ruler of the world's lists:

The World Wide Web, which is both web and labyrinth, not and ordered tree, and which of all vertigos promises us the most mystical, almost totally virtual one, and really offers us a catalogue of information that makes us feel wealthy and omnipotent, the only snag being that we don't know which of its elements refers to data from the real world and which does not, no longer with any distinction between truth and error. [Eco 2009: 360]

The personalised catalogues of films that streaming platforms offer “just for you” are in line with this model of cultural perception of Western civilisation that Umberto Eco talks about, which gives us the illusion of infinity, that beyond these few images of films, posters, descriptions of films, you click on a film, i.e.,

another world, and, after watching it, the algorithm generates an infinite list of films again.

Algorithmic recommendations on streaming platforms

An online *Netflix Technology Blog* that holds a post published on 30 January 2023, by multiple authors stating the following:

When members [meaning subscribers] are shown a title on Netflix, the displayed artwork, trailers, and synopses are personalized. That means members see the assets that are most likely to help them make an informed choice. These assets are a critical source of information for the member to make a decision to watch, or not watch, a title. The stories on Netflix are multidimensional and there are many ways that a single story could appeal to different members. We want to show members the images, trailers, and synopses that are most helpful to them for making a watch decision. [Tang, Vartakavi, Badonie, Segalin, Iyengar 2023]

Netflix offers lists called *We think you will love this*, based on what you have watched before, categorising and taking the lists to ever greater infinity, offering a *Netflix* section called *Retro TV*, categorising historical films as *Romantic Historical Films*, *European Historical Films*, as *Award-winning Historical Films*, *Korean Historical Films*, *Documentary Historical Films*, and even further down the listings are made when entering the keywords World War I or World War II into the *Netflix* search engine. The algorithm offers us the choice between colour or black-and-white films about the World Wars, and documentaries. Words such as “Holocaust” are subject to a categorisation or listing algorithm, which gives you films like *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002), *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994), etc. Similarly, *Cold War*, *Communism*, *Democracy*, *Berlin Wall*, and *Putin* are subject to a categorisation or listing algorithm. The pages of streaming platforms are a kind of “shop window” described by Umberto Eco, which is becoming more and more detailed. Hence, the audience is also becoming more and more detailed and fragmented. The digitisation of films and images has not only facilitated this culture of list-making but has also taken away the viewer’s desire to search for his or her own film. Instead, a digitisation algorithm developed by a gatekeeper does it for him or her. These facts allow us to look at the question of the crisis of film criticism, as already said before, when AI takes the place of these gatekeepers of criticism.

The logic of the lists offered by these streaming platforms is mostly unclear; these lists have some internal logic that is known only to AI. If a film historian or critic were to offer you films about the Cold War or the Holocaust, they would have

to justify their criteria for including one or the other in the list, but AI does not allow such criteria.

Promotional text in the reception of films is also important, which, similar to categorisation, is offered by a two-to-three-word description of films, a characteristic indicative of the film catalogues on digital streaming platforms. For example, on *Netflix*, the most common descriptors for historical films are words like “Violent”, “Dark”, “Emotional”, “Intimate”, “Suspenseful”, “Heartfelt”, “Tearjerker”, and “Period Piece”. The visual representation of each film in the *Netflix* catalogue includes the following two-to-three-word description. For example, the 2022 year film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Edward Berger, is identified as “Violent”, “Dark”, *The Pianist* and *Schindler’s List* are characterised as “Violent”, “Dark”, “Tearjerker”.

Categorisation and framing techniques

Another global streaming platform *MUBI* is a more advanced framing and contextualisation example – the platform offers a different framing method for the films – there are specifically curated lists of films, and each of the films is catalogued using the traditional promotional tools – stills of the film, trailer and synopsis offering also a specifically written description of the film – *MUBI* take on the film that provides the context and also highlights achievements of the film.

It could be said that the film’s three-word signifiers frame the audience in a way that is consistent with the theory of framing developed by linguist George Lakoff [Lakoff and Johnson 1980], where that metaphor is the way people perceive and experience the world. From this theory of metaphor, Lakoff developed the theory of framing, which argues that people’s reactions to a process or phenomenon are determined by the angle from which the phenomenon is presented. Words, according to Lakoff, are given a certain interpretative frame that orients thinking in a certain direction and determines the opinion of a society or community on various problems and phenomena; G. Lakoff considered framing as a mental structure that words can evoke in our consciousness. When a word (e.g., holocaust, deportation) is read out, certain frames of ideas are activated in the mind of the viewer. According to Lakoff, framing steers thinking in a certain direction. This means that with the help of such lists of streamer’s digital catalogues it is possible to direct thinking, including the reception of a work of art, in a particular context or direction, so that we are framed to cry watching a film or that it will make our emotions arise.

Compared to global streaming platforms, local Latvian streaming platforms – *TET Plus*, *viedtelevizija.lv* and *Go3* categorise film lists more modestly, sorting them and selecting keywords only by genre – for example, *TET* selects 3–4 genre

names – e.g., *Chronicles of Melanie* – “Historical”, “Biography”, “Drama”; *Dvēseļu putenis / Blizzard of Souls* (Dzintars Dreiberģs, 2019) – “Action”, “Drama”, “Historical”, “War”, *Sutemose / In the Dusk* (Šarūnas Bartas, 2019) – “Drama”, “Historical”.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that global streaming platforms are advancing in the development of reception and framing perspectives for audiences. By using algorithm-driven categorisations, personalised and targeted promotional materials (visuals) and descriptions of films – global streaming platforms such as *Netflix* and *MUBI* contribute to shaping audience reception of historical films. Partly, these strategies provide more context of historical films for contemporary viewers. In contrast, local streaming platforms in Latvia, such as *TET Plus*, *Viedtelevizija.lv* and *Go3*, are currently more limited in these categorisation methods and contextualisation of descriptions and promotional materials. The lack of historical context within this limited approach possibly provides an inadequate differentiation between historical films and classical films produced during the Soviet occupation period, thereby potentially undermining the reception of these films and leaving audiences ambiguous. It would be beneficial for these platforms to invest in technological advancements and engage film scholars and historians to develop materials that would provide contextual insights and paratextual resources (e.g., detailed film synopsis, historical context descriptions, documentaries, expert commentaries and curated discussions). Implementing a more refined categorisation that distinguishes between classical and historical films would improve audience reception, comprehension and critical engagement with historical content. Collaborations with film scholars, film critics and historians would ensure a more curated and in-depth reception, thereby educating the audience and providing context. An integrated approach connecting the algorithmic AI recommendation systems with human curation would improve audience engagement, contextual understanding, and overall viewing experience. The greatest challenge of the digitisation era remains to ensure that the context of past texts is not lost but is comprehensibly communicated to contemporary and future audiences in accordance with accurate historical reality.

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