

ROCK ON BONES

**ROCK ON BONES: THE ROLE OF WESTERN MUSIC AND SOVIET ROCK IN
PERESTROIKA AND POST-SOVIET CINEMA**

by

Alexandra Karaivanova

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by

Alexandra Karaivanova

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Dr. Justin Wilmes

Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures

Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the role of Western and Soviet rock music as represented in perestroika and post-Soviet film. This research aims to define the political subtext and historical accuracy of the musical movements represented in films, such as the stilyagi movement of the 1940s-1960s and the Soviet rock movement of the 1970s-1990s. Films of interest include *Assa* (1987), *The Needle* (1988), *Taxi Blues* (1990), *Hipsters* (2008), and *Leto* (2018). There was an interplay between the musical films of perestroika and the Soviet rock movement, which mythologized those rockers and lent cultural capital to the films. Moving into post-Soviet cinema, directors are able to engage with reflective nostalgia to retroactively paint the stilyagi and Soviet rock movements as more active and revolutionary than they were, imparting stronger political messaging. Films from both periods manipulate diegesis and utilize song choice to make social commentary the movements themselves could not have made.

Keywords: stilyagi, perestroika cinema, post-Soviet cinema, Leningrad Rock Club, Viktor Tsoi

Introduction

Musical films are commonly associated with the American film tradition, but Russia has a rich history with the musical film tradition. Some of the first Russian musicals emerged in the 1930s and put a uniquely Soviet spin on the film musical genre in the United States at the time. In the 1940s-1960s, the Soviet Union saw a counterculture movement known as *stilyagi*, hipsters who were deeply tied to jazz. Jazz, at the time, was deemed dangerous by the authorities. *Stilyagi* were obsessed with individuality and consumerism, much to the dismay of the Communist Party. Following the Western jazz obsession, Russians had their own underground rock movement, inspired by British and American rock bands. Despite Western influence, the movement ended up uniquely Russian. Both Soviet cinema and music were state-sponsored and monitored, and their overlap is notable. The political implications of the music and films of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods are of interest to film historians. There are numerous perspectives on the role rock music did or did not play in the Westernization of the Soviet Union, and its eventual collapse.

Musical films released during perestroika (1985-1991) overlapped with the Soviet rock movement — especially as seen through the rise of Viktor Tsoi — where rock musicians were utilized as amateur actors or left in charge of the musical score. Such films helped legitimize and mythologize the Soviet rock movement, which was not always in alignment with state-sponsored ideology. In post-Soviet musical films, like *Leto and Hipsters*, directors are able to impart stronger political messages and retroactively paint the *stilyagi* and Soviet rock movements as revolutionary. Western jazz and rock music are highlighted as the means to challenge the establishment, authorities, and previous generations. In these films, the countercultures are

depicted as borrowing idealism from the West. The song choices and manipulation of diegesis in both films act as social commentary that the movements themselves would not have made.

This paper will first explore the origins and nuances of the *stilyagi* and rock movements of the USSR from a historical and theoretical lens. The following section will examine how Soviet rock music was utilized in perestroika films such as *Assa* (1987), *The Needle* (1988), and *Taxi Blues* (1990). The next section analyzes how retrospective musicals (*Hipsters* and *Leto*) from the post-Soviet period depicted Soviet youth countercultures, the use of Russian and Western rock music, and how the soundtrack imparts meaning. Throughout, the political significance of the Soviet rock genre and the rock-influenced musicals is discussed.

Literature Review and Historical Analysis

Stilyagi (1940s-1960s)

Stilyagi Origins / Fashion

In the aftermath of World War II, the victorious Soviets faced a new adversary — a counterculture of youths who were called *stilyagi* (“style hunters” or “hipsters”). Interestingly, *stilyagi* was not a self-labeled name: one of the central newspapers created the term to be derogatory, but youth adopted it because they did revere style (Troitsky, 1987). As described in Artemy Troitsky’s first-hand account of Soviet rock history, *stilyagi* “danced and dressed in style.” *Stilyagi* adorned bright colored ties and suits, enjoyed dancing boogie, and embraced American jazz music. Mark Edele (2002), a historian who specializes in the Soviet Union, argues that *stilyagi* represent the tradition for postwar societies to develop hedonistic lifestyles.

Edele argues that *stiliashnichestvo* developed in the Soviet youth for gender and class reasons. Many of the young men who turned to the *stilyagi* lifestyle were not old enough to have

fought in World War II. These men could not connect to or mimic the masculinity of the heroes on the frontline. Thus, they looked to the West for inspiration on creating their own postwar masculinity. *Stiliazhnichestvo* was largely a male phenomenon and performed for other men. In addition to *stiliazhnichestvo* affirming masculinity, the first *stilyagi* were *zoolatia molodezh* (Golden Youth: children of the Soviet elite) who aimed to distinguish themselves from the lower class. To be a *stilyagi*, one had to have access to real foreign clothing (typically through someone who traveled outside of the Soviet Union) and thus, as Edele writes, “Becoming a *stilyagi* presupposed disposable income.” In a similar vein, scholar Graham H. Roberts (2013) discusses that *stiliazhnichestvo* is not possible without style, and style is not possible without consumerism. Nonetheless, lower classes found ways to copy the *zoolatia molodezh*. Clothes and items from Western embassy personnel ended up in second-hand stores, which allowed for more youth to adopt *stiliazhnichestvo*. Middle-class *stilyagi* would also make their own garments and accessories. While the original inspiration for the *stilyagi* was primarily Western, the lower class creativity needed to copy the *zoolatia moldezh* made the *stilyagi* style uniquely Soviet. *Stilyagi* became imitations of imitations. *Stilyagi* youth from this period have said “In the West, nobody wore anything like it, this was clearly our invention” (Edele, 2002).

Stilyagi and Jazz / Bone Records

In addition to ostentatious clothing, the *stilyagi* were known for their love of jazz music. The Communist Party began an anti-jazz campaign in 1946 — countless jazz musicians were arrested, the word джаз (jazz) was forbidden in public, and saxophones were being confiscated by 1949 (Edele, 2002). Despite the party’s best effort to diminish jazz in public, jazz and other Western genres were still able to permeate the Iron Curtain via radio platforms such as the BBC

and Voice of America. The vast majority of Soviet radio sets were not able to pick up on Western broadcasts, and only a million receivers had access. However, on average, 39 people would share each receiver to hear Western broadcasts (Edele, 2002). Broadcasts would also be tape recorded and disseminated.

In addition to foreign broadcasts, Russians were able to enjoy jazz music through physical records. Edele (2002) explains “Red army officers stationed in East Berlin bought large numbers of jazz records and brought them to Moscow, where they supplied the black market.” These records were predominantly available to *zoolatia moldezh* who could afford them. Similar to clothing, creative alternatives to Western originals developed as censorship became stricter while demand for Western items rose. X-ray scans, which could be purchased cheaply in bulk for kopeks or found discarded from hospitals, would be cut into the shape of 78 rpm records and a hole would be burned in the center with cigarettes. Western vinyls would be copied onto the x-ray, creating what was colloquially known as “music on bones” or “records on ribs” (Troitsky, 1987). X-rays, similar to vinyl, were plastic and easy to engrave. These bone records would become one of the first versions of the flexi discs, known to worsen in quality each time they are played, giving them a short lifespan. The bone records could easily be folded up and transported discreetly. Owners of these bone records also had an alibi that the X-rays were their personal medical scans, as opposed to musical contraband (Galimberti, 2022). The ingenuity of bone records helps to explain how jazz and the *stiliazhnichestvo* were able to persist under and evade Stalin’s repressive Communist Party.

Stilyagi were deemed deviant by the majority of the population, the Communist Party, and the entire Soviet state. *Stiliazhnichestvo* embodied many elements of the West and of capitalism that the state wanted to deter, but it is important to note that *stilyagi* were not trying to

be a political oppositional movement. Edele (2002) states that because *stilyagi* were apolitical, they “had greater chances of survival and reproduction than any attempt to be politically oppositional to the Soviet state.” That is, the punishment for *stilyagi* was not as severe as it was with other oppositional groups — the state very easily could have imprisoned or executed them. Instead, *stilyagi* were predominantly monitored and scrutinized by their youth peers in the Komsomol. For that reason, Edele argues that Stalin and the Communist Party did not cause or prevent *stilyagi* because it was a larger cultural phenomenon of gender and class in the post-war USSR. Interestingly, *stilyagi* fashion popularized into the mainstream once Stalin died, and thus the movement lost its relevance and the flamboyant *stilyagi* of the 40s became obsolete in The Thaw.

The Thaw / Vyne / ISA (1950s-1970s)

The Khrushchev Thaw

Joseph Stalin died in 1953, leading to organizational disarray within the Communist Party, but Nikita Khrushchev ultimately rose to power. Khrushchev served as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 until 1964, and as the premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964 (Ra’Anan, 2006). In 1956, Khrushchev delivered a “secret speech” denouncing Stalin’s “cult of personality” and began a period of de-Stalinization (Albright, 2011). One aspect of his de-Stalinization efforts was a foreign policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the West. As Khrushchev took a softer stance on the West, Western media and ideology could flow more freely into the Soviet Union. The level of repression fluctuated under Khrushchev, but it remained softer than other Soviet leaders. The cultural “Thaw” allowed for counter-cultures such as the *stilyagi* to grow, despite their contradictions with the expected

culture of Soviet ideology. Thus, the Thaw gave rise to a new generation of intellectuals and enabled a “Deterritorialization of Soviet life from within” (Yurchak, 2006). As Khrushchev took to a peaceful coexistence with the West, the Soviet youth turned towards ideating and intellectualizing the world outside of the Soviet regime.

Living Vyne

Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak has written extensively about Soviet society during this time period and how it deterritorialized temporality. Yurchak’s 2006 book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* explores in depth the paradoxes that existed leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yurchak characterizes the generations from the 1960s and on through a concept of *vyne* — existing outside of a reality, while still being in it. He borrows the term *vyne* from Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, but Yurchak’s use of the term focuses on how people were “simultaneously a part of the [Soviet] system and yet not following certain of its parameters.”

This generation utilized and built upon Soviet structures, despite being disinterested in the Soviet state. For instance, the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers was an after-school program run by the Komsomol (Youth Communist League) aimed at raising loyal Communists. However, the Pioneers hosted activities that allowed children to develop critical thinking skills and question authority, such as the state. The Soviet education system emphasized learning and collectivism — especially in an attempt to keep up with advancements in the West — which inadvertently lent itself towards mass gatherings of diverse individuals who would openly and harshly debate. Furthermore, many students and academics of this time period were financially backed by the state. Yurchak uses an example of physicists who convinced the state to give them freedom in

their research since their best discoveries came by accident. With all that freedom afforded to them by the state, these physicists created intellectual bonds and searched for *istina* (deep truth) that went outside of the Soviet scope and ideology. Ultimately, there was a paradoxical relationship between intellectuals/counter-culture movements and the state. State-sponsored structures controlled and monitored activity, yet also provided the resources and spaces for free thinking and opposing currents in culture. Yurchak highlights “outside of the Soviet state project, this milieu would have made no sense and would have failed to thrive.”

Much of how this milieu thrived and spread was in social spaces, such as the Archeological Circle and Saigon Cafe. Young individuals, predominantly students, who populated such spaces were often in search of *istina* and saw themselves as neither pro-Soviet nor anti-Soviet. Intellectual discourse, as well as diversity, flowed freely and even harshly in these social spaces. This milieu of youth revered *obshchenie* (communication) — “it was important not only to read certain books, discuss certain ideas, and listen to certain music, but, above all, to remain involved in the never-ending and open-ended *obshchenie* with or without these books and ideas in mind. The open-ended and unplanned nature of the time spent together was more important than any concrete discussion” (Yurchak, 2006).

Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)

Saigon Cafe can be seen as an interesting example of what French philosopher Louis Althusser's (2010) calls “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA). Althusser builds upon the Marxist concept of State Apparatus — the government, the administration, the police, the military, the courts, the prisons, etc. Althusser redefines these institutions as Repressive State Apparatus, given these apparatuses function through repression/violence and are public extensions of one

ruling class/body. Conversely, ISAs are more subtle and manifest through religious institutions, schools, media, trade unions, family, and more. Each ISA, through its habits and rituals, embodies an ideology that its patrons naturally adopt. Diverse, and even contradictory, individuals may gather at ISAs, but they are unified by an overarching ideology. Many of these ISAs exist in a private domain, but Althusser notes that ISAs are still an extension of the state. With the KGB presence at Saigon, it becomes evident that ISAs are entangled with the state.

While it appears that the Soviet youth in the 1950s-70s were not aligned with the official state ideology, these alternative institutions they frequented were maintained with awareness of differing views. In the case of Saigon, individuals sought out *istina* and *obshchenie*. Saigon offered the ‘freedom’ to do so, but it also established a culture where intellectualism was limited to inactionable discourse, and the discourse was not politically targeting the Soviet Union. Hence, many of these subcultures and phenomena examined by Yurchak did not identify as either pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet.

Saigon, and its analogs in other social contexts, were allowed to exist because they imparted an ideology of disinterest in the Soviet state. Disinterest was safer than opposition. It was in the state's interest to keep younger generations confined in private spaces like cafes, rather than provoking the youth to engage in active street protests. With *obshchenie* being a never-ending and all-consuming lifestyle, the youth were intellectually satiated at and outside of Saigon. The culture of relatively apolitical *obshchenie* made the youth so preoccupied that they could not have the time to be direct adversaries to the modern state. This dynamic between the state and youth was possible because the youth were confident that no one would take action against them, as seen in individuals’ accounts in Yurchak’s book. Thus, state-monitored ISAs reinforced this alternative lifestyle of being *vyne*.

Melodiia / Russian Rock Movement / Leningrad Rock Club (60s-90s)***Melodiia and VIA***

Scholar George Weickhardt (2004) explores how Russian musical movements, particularly classical music, were able to withstand totalitarian regimes. Much of it, he argues, was through cooperation with the regime. Weickhardt includes classical composer Dmitri Shostakovich as an example. Shostakovich was able to survive under the Soviet regime by occasionally creating propagandistic pieces for the state, allowing the state to co-opt his ambiguous pieces, and not correcting the state's misinterpretations of those ambiguous pieces. Weickhardt identifies that the Soviet policy towards music was not uniformly enforced, especially compared to the censorship of literature and political dissidents of the time. He even argues that the Thaw never ended for music, like it had for literature in the 1960s, accounting for the uneven music policy and relatively liberal view of music. Weickhardt concludes that "As long as the music stayed out of politics, it could be tolerated." While Weickhardt focused on classical music, his conclusions relate to the developing rock movement. Classical music had previous musical institutions to operate through, whereas rock music did not have a decades-long institution to operate through or be confined by. Thus, these less accepted genres like jazz, rock, and pop could slip through the cracks until they had to be recognized.

Throughout the 1960s, Western pop and rock music became increasingly popular in the Soviet Union. In response to the influx of Western music, the Soviet Council of Ministers — specifically the Ministry of Culture — sanctioned and oversaw the creation of Melodiia in 1964, a record label with a monopoly on the recording and distribution of music. Melodiia maintained studios and equipment across much of the Soviet Union. Melodiia became vital to musicians, as

it created official groups and determined professional status. With professional status, musicians met state employment requirements and had access to the resources to record and perform music (Schäfer 2021; Verspieren 2017). By 1968, professional groups were pushed by the state “in an attempt to satisfy the demand for swinging, shaking, 'modern' electric guitar music” (Bright, 1985). The first round of Russian pop musicians was largely imitative, copying the styles of beloved Western artists, such as the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix (Bright, 1985). Many of these early groups were known as vocal instrumental ensembles (VIA). While VIA existed throughout the 60s prior to Melodiia, it became a more adopted term by 1966 (Schäfer, 2021). Schäfer explains “The [VIA] abbreviation itself is often used not as a clear generic classification, but as a sort of place holder, a synonym for a state-sanctioned rock or pop band.” Troitsky (1987) goes as far as to say that VIA was a “castrated” version of rock music (pg 28). VIA blended elements of popularizing Western music with traditional lyrics and folk instruments. Even if it was tamped down, the eras of VIA did help accustom the Soviet population to rock aesthetics and sounds. Thus, Steinholt (2005) argues that the “uniformed and meek-sounding VIA” did prepare people for the Soviet rock movement to come. VIA dominated the 1970s, as Leonid Brezhnev tightened control against Western ideologies and their manifestations (Verspieren, 2017).

Eras of VIA/Rock Music

Scholar Terry Bright (1985) distinguishes three eras of rock/pop music from this generation. The first era was the largely imitative rock and pop VIA who drew inspiration from The Beatles. Professional and amateur groups alike sang about girls and love, which could be devoid of any propaganda and the Soviet reality. The lyricism of these groups embodied Soviet

romanticism for better days to come, but the overall sound mattered more than the lyrics. Bright explains that their songs did not have distinct points of view, leading to the next era of music.

Coming into the 1970s, amateur rock musicians began to develop their own compositions, instead of mimicking the Western rock sound. This second era of music was more confident and had more to say, making lyricism more important than it was in the first era. The lyrics captured themes of moral corruption and the search for freedom. These songs depicted the social circumstances experienced by the milieu of youth, and even approached it with irony and criticism. It is important to note that this second era of popular music still had hopeful undertones and connections to the Russian spirit, which is why lyrics of criticism were permissible. Typical songs were about a man trying to make sense of the world and their place in the world, even if it was contrary to what was expected of them. Even within this new focus on lyricism in the 1970s, there were differing forms of songwriting: one emphasized the “simplicity of everyday speech” (as seen with the group *Mashina Vremeni*/Time Machine) and another was a more esoteric, poetic approach (as seen with Akvarium) where the lyrics would not make any sense out of context. Both forms of lyricism were liked and understood by Soviet intellectuals who were in charge of the media, though those in the underground were too uncouth at first to be sanctioned by the state.

Bright identifies a third era of popular music — punk/new-wave in the 1980s — which he argues ruined the progress made in the first two eras. The musicians of this era were more confrontational and not interested in coexisting with authority. This generation of musicians terrified the intellectual elites (who were open-minded to the previous eras of rock) and the general public alike. Ultimately, they flipped the script on the Soviet Romanticism present in earlier musical generations. Their lyricism had “sharp irony and accurate realism,” which was

what the state deemed dangerous. Youth from this time said the songs “are laughing at ourselves because we live in a dreadful reality, a trap with no escape route. As you cannot offer us an alternative, at least leave us alone to live our lives the way we want.” This reinforces Yurchak’s idea of living *vyne*, as explored earlier. This generation of music no longer aimed to be state-approved or co-opted, abandoning the Soviet fairy tale for their beatnik reality. Despite being too controversial for the state and reversing musical progress, the third generation did open the door for other bands, in milder forms, to vocalize anti-Soviet sentiments moving forward.

Boiler Room Rockers

During late socialism (70s-80s), people often gave up sophisticated jobs for ones like boiler room technicians. Employment was mandatory in the Soviet Union, and this generation of youth maintained the bare minimum for employment, aiming to maximize their time for *obshchenie*. Boiler room technicians would have one 24-hour shift every four days, with barely anything to do. With this type of schedule, youth could still pursue personal interests and *obshchenie*. Amateur rock musicians, in particular, populated these boiler rooms and were colloquially known as *kochegary-roker* (boiler room rockers). Soviet rock bands from this period even wrote songs about the boiler room phenomenon: Kino has a song titled “*Ya khochu byt’ kochegarom*” (I want to be a boiler room attendant) and Akvarium has a lyric “the generation of yard sweepers and night watchers.” These musicians could not make a living as musicians, largely because they lacked official status from the state, so they sought out these occupations, which required minimal investment. Yurchak (2006) points out that musicians at this time could live off of very low wages: “three rubles per week, or roughly, at official exchange rates of the time, for about \$1.80.” For the musicians, the boiler room wages functioned similarly to

academic research grants for students of the time period. Musicians, however, were unrestrained compared to those tied to academic institutions and obligations. They had plenty of time to be musicians.

Alongside the rise in social spaces for *obshchenie* after The Thaw, *tusovka* developed in this period of late socialism. *Tusovka*, as defined by Soviet pop culture scholar Dr. Polly McMichael (2005), represents a “group of people with shared interests, their haunts or, more specifically, to a kind of party or happening.” The *tusovka* could be an actual party, or more broadly, the community that would attend such parties (Yurchak, 2006). The rock *tusovka* hosted and attended many unofficial concerts (Troitsky, 1987). Yurchak (2006) indicates that “The main texture of the communication in the rock *tusovka* was sarcasm and a lack of any political themes.” McMichael (2005) adds to this, stating the rock *tusovka* enabled a relationship between rock musicians and their fans. The rock *tusovka*, and the live performances by amateur rock bands became more about connecting with one another than about faithfulness to the music. Musicians such as Boris Grebenshchikov (Akvarium) and Maik Naumenko (Zoopark) were aware that they were only as much of a rockstar as others perceived them, making that community interaction at the *tusovka* vital. Rock culture in the Soviet Union, by its nature, restricted the amount of success possible for amateurs, meaning there was an impermanence of the rock star image they aspired towards (McMichael, 2005).

The rock *tusovka*, while ideologically resembling the youth at Saigon, was deemed more politically dangerous by the state. The state actively campaigned on the dangers of rock music until it was untameable, and they needed to devise a new response.

Leningrad Rock Club and Perestroika

On March 7, 1981, the first official rock club was opened in the Soviet Union in Leningrad. The venue held about 600 seats and it became strikingly popular with rock bands and fans alike. The aim of the official rock club was to make rock music more palatable, as state officials understood that rock music was not going anywhere. Previously, the rock scene was held underground and subject to police raids. As the movement grew, it became increasingly difficult for the state to target every underground show. By creating an official avenue for rock music, it was easier for the state to dictate what was acceptable and to isolate musicians who did not align with state ideology (Steinholt, 2005).

The Rock Club was run by a committee of rock enthusiasts in cooperation with the KGB, Komsomol, and the rock bands themselves. The KGB officers would monitor audiences from the balcony and dictate what topics were appropriate for songs (Maynes, 2021). Thus, the Leningrad Rock Club can be seen as another example of an ISA. Similarly to Saigon, the KGB and counterculture of rock musicians were largely able to coexist without violent confrontations. The state knew it was vital to maintain a cordial relationship with the movement it wished to control. Scholar Yngvar B. Steinholt (2005) writes:

The taming of ideologically problematic cultural activities by promoting a client–patron relationship is a practice which goes back centuries in Russian bureaucracy, to the reign of Ivan the Terrible, if not before. In order to remain at their posts and secure their organisation's continued existence, the LMDST officials would make sure of preserving a good relationship with the controlling authorities and keep a close eye on members' activities. The Rock Club's council was thus kept under constant pressure to punish members who exceeded the invisible boundaries of the acceptable. In turn, predominantly

older members who felt comfortable with the degree of artistic freedom offered, would attempt to restrain younger bands, who wanted to test or push limits.

Former club president Nikolai Mikhailov, however, saw the KGB presence as helpful and argued the KGB agents he dealt with at the club “kept their bosses in the Communist Party or the police from shutting us down” (Maynes, 2021). By the late 80s, many Soviet cities were populated with their own rock clubs.

Similar to the *vyne* phenomenon of Saigon, Leningrad rock fans continued to exist as though they were outside of Soviet parameters, despite populating these Soviet-owned rock clubs. The rock fans of this time period saw the club as a symbol of freedom. The rock musicians who played these clubs embodied the concept of *vyne* by circumventing Soviet restrictions on their anti-Soviet lyrics. Bands would have politically charged or beatnik motifs in their songs but would suggest the lyrics were satire or against the U.S, rather than acknowledging their anti-Soviet position. Thus, they utilized state resources to perform songs where they reimagine the world in which they exist.

Once Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the uncertain policy towards rock music became dramatically liberalized. Unofficial and previously banned groups were receiving official media recognition and support. Melodiia released a “real” rock album. By 1987, unofficial groups were also granted the ability to advertise their shows — thus chipping away at the importance for official status (Ramet et al., 2019). Gorbachev’s policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) not only benefited music, but other media formats like film.

Film Analysis

Diegesis

Throughout this section, the concepts of diegesis and non-diegesis will be evaluated as they apply to the selected films. Diegesis refers to what is known to exist in the narrative world, whereas non-diegesis encompasses what is external and not known/seen/heard by characters in the narrative. In film, sound is the most common element examined in non-diegetic and diegetic spheres (Neumeyer 2009). Diegetic sound would include things such as conversations had between characters, environmental sounds, music played and heard by characters, etc. Non-diegetic sound includes anything added in post-production, such as the musical score that is not heard by characters, sound effects, voice-overs, etc. In some instances, sounds will be trans-diegetic, such as songs that begin in the non-diegetic space and become part of the diegetic soundscape or vice versa (Hunter, 2012).

While most sound is easily identifiable in the diegetic/non-diegetic binary, arguments have been made in favor of defining sounds that do not entirely belong to either. A few of the films explored below are musicals and enter an ambiguous space between diegesis and non-diegesis. One film scholar, Robynn Stilwell (2019), refers to this as the fantastical gap.

The phrase "fantastical gap" seemed particularly apt for this liminal space because it captured both its magic and its danger, the sense of unreality that always obtains as we leap from one solid edge toward another at some unknown distance and some uncertain stability and sometimes we're in the air before we know we've left the ground.

"Fantastical" can literally mean fantasy (cinematically, a musical number, dream, or flashback), and in fact this is one implication of the change of state that has begun to be explored by scholars like Rick Altman and David Neumeyer; but it can also mean, musically, an improvisation, the free play of possibility.

In addition to Stilwell's fantastical gap concept, Rick Altman proposes the concept of supradiegesis as a convention of the film musical genre. Supradiegesis suggests that as audio "dissolves" into song sequences, the musical soundtrack takes priority over image and the film enters "a 'place' of transcendence where time stands still, where contingent concerns are stripped away to reveal the essence of things" (Altman, 1987). Supradiegesis connects music to the realist diegetic world, while the real world is on pause.

Rock in Perestroika Films: Analysis of *Assa*, *The Needle*, and *Taxi Blues*

VGIK and Perestroika Filmmakers

In the 1970s, there were numerous state-sanctioned restrictions which made it difficult for underground rock to expand beyond metropolitan areas. As the Era of Stagnation came to an end and perestroika began in 1985, amateur rock musicians and the Soviet film industry relied on one another to achieve their separate goals. Film wanted to modernize and stay relevant, while rock wanted a public platform and access to professional equipment usually withheld by the state for professional groups. The first notable instance of rock and film's overlap was in *The Soul* (1981), featuring Andrey Makarevich of the rock band *Mashina Vremeni* (Time Machine). This film was the first of its kind to give a rock musician a speaking role (Safariants & Beumers, 2017). Much of Russian film and rock's relationship can be owed to the oldest film school in the world, Moscow's Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK).

VGIK came to be the "film school of rock" of this generation (Safariants, 2019). Director Sergei Solovev (director of *Assa*, 1987) taught a VGIK course to students from Kazakhstan, emphasizing the aesthetics of French New Wave cinema/cinematic playfulness and rule-breaking. His Kazakh workshop was mutually symbiotic for students and Solovev himself.

Rashid Nugmanov (director of *The Needle*) was one of Solovev's students in the Kazakh workshop. One of the first assignments Solovev gave to Nugmanov was an investigative report: Nugmanov went to Leningrad and created *Ya-khkha* (1986), a documentary vignette of the Leningrad Rock Club starring Boris Grebenshchikov and Viktor Tsoi. Nugmanov's project introduced Solovev and the VGIK to the Soviet underground rock scene. Specifically, Nugmanov introduced the cult rock musician Viktor Tsoi and Solovev to one another. The documentary also established the greater relationship for rock musicians to collaborate with the VGIK and Kazakh workshop, discovering that rock musicians could be used as untrained actors. Shortly after, Solovev had Tsoi appear and sing in his film *Assa* (1987). A year later, Nugmanov cast Tsoi in the main role of his film *The Needle*. Thus, *Ya-khkha*, *Assa*, and *The Needle* can be seen as a triptych of Tsoi's rise to fame as an actor/musician and a testament to his legacy. The *Ya-khkha* documentary helped push Kino and Viktor Tsoi into the mainstream, with their popularity growing with each film. Solovev and Nugmanov's collaboration at VGIK and with Tsoi is emblematic of the saturation of the rock film phenomenon.

Rockers in Assa

The film *Assa* (Solovev, 1987) does not stick to one genre and contains multiple storylines, but it is largely a crime story meets love triangle, set in Yalta. The story focuses on Krymov (an old gangster who is being targeted by the KGB), Alika (a young nurse and Krymov's lover), and Bananan (a young rocker who performs at the local restaurant/venue and is Alika's new love interest). Bananan introduced Alika to the musical youth counterculture. As Krymov discovers Alika and Bananan's relationship, he threatens Bananan and ultimately has his henchmen murder him. When Alika finds this out, she murders Krymov. Throughout this film,

Krymov represents the old Soviet state. He is corrupt, and youth rockers like Bananan are there to save people like Alika from Krymov's hold. Even if Bananan was the one who ended up literally needing to be saved from his demise, the film portrays Bananan's death as tragic, and there is little sympathy for Krymov.

As the movie approaches its natural end, the title screen lets viewers know: "But this is not the end. It would be unfair to not tell you what happened later. The story is only beginning." Viewers are taken back to the dance hall and Viktor Tsoi makes his cameo. Despite Tsoi having less than ten minutes of screen time, the final scene in *Assa* with Tsoi became one of the most significant and referenced scenes of the entire film. With Bananan's death, there is an opening for the singer position at the small venue/restaurant and Tsoi is encouraged to apply by one of Bananan's band members. A party member asks for Tsoi's qualifications (such as Union membership or formal musical education) and Tsoi's character only responds that he is a boiler room worker. Bananan's friend says that Tsoi's character is a natural musician and "lives anywhere in the great wide world," emphasizing the mindset of *vyne* and detachment from the Soviet Union. Eventually, Tsoi walks away from the party official and listeners hear a rock instrumental (which belongs to the fantastical gap) accompany Tsoi to an almost empty room.

Tsoi joins the band that was playing the rock instrumental and sings his/Kino's song *Khochu peremen* (waiting for change). Tsoi's voice dominates with the message of "We want changes! It's the demand of our hearts. We want changes! It's the demand of our eyes. In our laughter, in our tears, and the pulse in our veins." As the song progresses, the camera pans from Tsoi and the band to show that they are no longer in the small restaurant. Instead, they are in a large venue to accommodate a crowd of thousands of fans holding candles, illuminating the darkness, and singing along enthusiastically. There was an open call for the fans of this scene,

highlighting how much demand there was for rockers like Tsoi. In this powerful ending scene, *Assa* simultaneously humanizes and mythologizes the rock counter-culture. The power of rockers, even as they are shown as everyday youth throughout the rest of the film, is undeniable.

Interestingly, Mosfilms (the state film studio) was known to edit the lyrical content of songs in earlier films — but in this final scene in *Assa* they were convinced to leave the lyrics of amateur rock as they were. Thus, Solovev succeeded in having a state entity/ISA portray Soviet rock in a positive light, on the terms of rock musicians. Additionally, the film's score was created by Boris Grebenshchikov of Akvarium, so there is an authenticity to the film's portrayal of rock at the time. Furthermore, the song *Khochu peremen* became the anthem for the perestroika generation and signaled the dawn of a new era. As the title card suggested, rock and Tsoi's domination was “only beginning.”

Tsoi and Non-Diegesis in The Needle

A year after Tsoi's short cameo in *Assa*, Nugmanov's debut film *The Needle* (1988) allowed Tsoi to further cement himself as a cultural icon in film and music. Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky (1992) point out that Nugamonov was more interconnected with the underground rock culture than Solovev, and *The Needle* highlights that difference. *Assa* is an outsider exploring the rock culture, whereas *The Needle* knows the rock culture well and extends a greater cinematic world for them. Alongside starring in the film, Tsoi was responsible for the film score, with Kino songs accounting for half of the soundtrack. *The Needle* is a blend of thriller, drama, and even at times comedy. Much of the film is ambiguous and even playful in its direction, especially compared to the nihilistic *chernuka* genre (portrayed daily life bleakly, in opposition to Soviet realism) that prevailed at the time. *The Needle* employs surrealist and

arthouse elements, and Nugmanov's techniques in this film would set off the Kazakh New Wave film movement.

The film follows Moro's (played by Tsoi) return to Alma Ata, Kazakhstan for money he is owed by an old friend. In his return to Alma-Ata, Moro reconnects with his former girlfriend Dina and discovers she has become addicted to morphine. With further investigation, Moro realizes a surgeon and drug lord named Artur (played by Pyotr Mamanov) has been supplying her with morphine and storing it at her residence. Moro takes Dina to the deserted and dried-out Aral Sea for her to detox, but she relapses when they return. Moro faces off with Artur and his drug mafia, but ultimately is unsuccessful. Moro is stabbed at the end of the film but is seen walking away with a cigarette, with his fate uncertain.

Throughout the film, the non-diegetic score aids in setting the tone and meaning for viewers. The film opens with Kino's song *Zvezda po imeni Solntse* (A Star Called Sun), an anti-war song, as we watch Moro walk and travel by bus to Alma-Ata. The song is useful for characterizing Moro's character as representing the culture of the Soviet rock scene, with lyrics such as "And we know it has always been / that fate is what we desire / He who lives by his own rules / and dies by them in his youth." The song also foreshadows that Moro's cinematic fate may be a young death. In the final scene as Moro is stabbed, Kino's song *Gruppa Krovi* (Blood Type) plays and lyrics such as "My blood type is on my sleeve / Wish me luck in the battle so I do not have to stay in this field" ring through. These lyrics relate literally to Moro's potentially bloody demise from battling the drug mafia, but they can also be interpreted as rock/youth's desire to be left out of a metaphorical war that is going on in Soviet society. Besides metaphorical war, the Soviet-Afghan War was occurring at this time, giving another layer of meaning to the song choice.

Besides non-diegetic songs, there is a recurring non-diegetic narrator/radio intercom who redirects scenes for the characters and viewers alike. At times, this narrator is even a source of comedic relief. Towards the end of the film, the narrator says “That’s not the purpose of life. The purpose of life.. my brain hurts, I can’t think anymore.” Scholar Ludmila Pruner (1992) summarizes the importance of the narrator by saying “the voice of a radio announcer comments on the events on the screen, creating a new semantic context that synthesizes the visual text on the screen with the audio text on the radio.”

The radio intercom narrator in *The Needle* can be seen as a prelude to the role Skeptic plays in *Leto* (Serebrennikov, 2018), as they both manipulate the diegesis, redirect viewers, and offer comedic relief. Other non-diegetic elements of *Leto* that pay homage to Nugmanov and Tsoi are the use of doodles on screens and cartoonish sound effects. In certain fight scenes in *The Needle*, the screen goes to black as punch noises are made and explosive doodles appear, rather than showing the actual fighting. The title card for the film is also written in a playful, fluid script, which is done in *Leto*, as well as *Hipsters*. Thus, Nugmanov and the Kazakh New Wave movement inspired later generations of filmmakers.

Pyotr Mamonov in Taxi Blues

Tsoi remained a musician first and foremost, with his film appearances typecasting him as himself. Other musicians wanted to expand past the role of underground musician and remain in the acting world, changing the rock genre. Pyotr Mamonov, from the band Zvuki Mu, was a supporting character in *The Needle* and later the lead in *Taxi Blues*, transitioning away from music. The character Mamonov portrays in *Taxi Blues* follows similar conventions to those of *Assa* and *The Needle* in portraying musical youth, and contrasting the old Soviet generation.

Taxi Blues follows the relationship between a serious and nationalistic taxi driver (Ivan Shlykov) and an alcoholic Jewish saxophone player (Alexey Seliverstov, referred to as Lyosha). Lyosha rides in Shlykov's taxi after a long night out with friends and tries to avoid paying his seventy ruble cab fare. Shlykov tracks down Lyosha and keeps his saxophone hostage to repay his debts. Shortly after, though, Shlykov remorsefully returns the saxophone and ends up opening his home to the homeless and destitute Lyosha. The relationship that develops between the two becomes about more than simply repaying that original debt. *Taxi Blues* can be considered a chernukha film, as it does take a bleak tone throughout, but that is not the only approach of the film. As scholar Alissa Timoshkina (2014) writes, "The question of Russia's rapport with the West lies at the heart of *Taxi Blues*, where it is figured through a homosocial/erotic relationship between [Lyosha and Shlykov]."

Lyosha represents the West and the younger Soviet generation, while Shlykov embodies the old Soviet spirit. Both individuals become enraged with one another because of their differences, yet they continue to spend time together. Shlykov wishes Lyosha were more disciplined and responsible, as Lyosha is free-spirited and unreliable. Shlykov pushes Lyosha to become a model Soviet citizen, but Lyosha remains free-spirited, unreliable, and in pursuit of self-indulgence. Lyosha shows no interest in changing and continues to pursue things of Western influence.

One day Lyosha is discovered by a famous American jazz musician and is invited to go on tour with him. Lyosha seizes the opportunity, leaving Shlykov and Soviet expectations behind. Lyosha gains international success as a saxophonist, and Shlykov is able to watch one of his concerts on television. In watching Lyosha on his screen, Shlykov finds a new respect for Lyosha. When Lyosha returns to Moscow, he shows little interest in reuniting with Shlykov, who

awaited his return. Lyosha had fully embraced the West and the West embraced him in a way Soviet society had not. Thus, Lyosha had little reason to engage with Soviet expectations anymore, especially as they were embodied in Shlykov. Shlykov had continually wanted Lyosha to change, only to finally understand Lyosha's natural talents once the West was involved.

Verdict

The collaboration between VGIK and rock musicians exemplified perestroika goals and stripped away some of the previous bureaucracy. Glasnost policies also allowed for rock music and Soviet cinema to be more mainstream. The era of perestroika rock-cinema painted Soviet rock as respectable, which was vital to rebranding rock musicians' contentious image with the state (Safariants & Beumers, 2017). In addition to portraying the rock movement, perestroika films often focused on the youth. Previous eras of films showed youth in a much different light. The Era of Stagnation film narratives for teenagers were that they were outsiders, aggressive, and lacking in values. The 1980s films, rockers, and youths inherited a "we are waiting for change" attitude from the Era of Stagnation. Subsequently, perestroika filmmakers shifted to portray teenagers as taking such stances in the face of crumbling Soviet ideologies. Rock music highlighted this lyrically and was anthemic for youth (Beumers, 2017).

Ultimately, perestroika films utilized the Socialist Realism trope of mythologizing youth heroes, with those heroes being portrayed by musicians from the rock scene (Safariants & Beumers, 2017). This legitimized rock musicians as cultural icons and actors. Solovev's film *Assa*, starring Viktor Tsoi, is the most representative of that trend. Perestroika films, like *Assa*, operated to resuscitate the film industry and redeem the youth counterculture image. Tsoi and

other rockers took on the role as perestroika's "new man." Post-Soviet cinema shifts to depict rock heroes as being victims.

Rock in Post-Soviet Film: Analysis of *Hipsters* and *Leto*

The films *Hipsters* (Todorovsky, 2008) and *Leto* (Serebrennikov, 2018) are both musical films that focus on Soviet youth countercultures. *Hipsters* is set in 1950s Moscow and focuses on *stilyagi* subculture and follows the character Mels' transformation into a *stilyaga*, engagement with the jazz genre, and ultimately his aspirations for self-expression despite disapproval from the Komsomol and others in Soviet society. The movie utilizes anachronistic Soviet rock music in correspondence with major plot developments. *Leto* is set in the summer of 1981 in Leningrad, loosely inspired by real events, and focuses on the dynamics between Victor Tsoi (of Kino), Mike Naumenko (of Zoopark), and Mike's wife Natalia. Outside of the love triangle, the film explores the Leningrad Rock Club — one of the few places rock music was allowed to be played, though with restrictions. The film manipulates diegesis and utilizes musical scenes that "did not happen" (as told by the narrator Skeptic) to portray the discretion that the rock subculture had to have during that time. Throughout both films, rock (in *Leto*) and jazz (in *Hipsters*) music functions as an expression of idealism borrowed from the West. The use of and interest in Western and Soviet rock music in both plots acts as a means to challenge the establishment, authorities, and previous generations. The song choices and supradiegesis in both films operate as social commentary.

Borrowed and Reimagined Western Idealism

Both *Leto* and *Hipsters* employ musical elements and center music as a key motif for the plot. Western music, and the desire to emulate its ideals or make a Russian equivalent, are seen in both films. In addition to the use of Western music, it is worth emphasizing that the genre of musicals is largely an American art form. Both time periods were influenced by the West, and choosing to tell these stories in a predominantly Western format helps to highlight that influence (van Nimwegen, 2019).

Within the film *Hipsters*, viewers can see the danger in engaging with Western music — and thus, beliefs like individualism and idealism — in characters such as Mels. One of the most striking scenes in the film that portrays the Western idealism of *stilyagi* is when Mels first gets his saxophone. The scene takes a turn into the fantastical gap as Mels goes from listening to jazz from a New York radio station, to trying to play Summertime by Charlie Parker in the mirror alone, to Charlie Parker playing the song with him, and finally, they are transported to a lively New York City rooftop. Mels' view of New York City captures this “imaginary West” which the *stilyagi* dreamed of. By the end of the film, however, Fred returns from the United States and informs Mels that there are “no *stilyagi* in America.” Due to the friction between the West and the USSR, there is a delay in the dispersal of Western culture, resulting in this potentially fabricated and imaginary West.

Despite this revelation about the imaginary West, *Hipsters* changes tones and ends the film with a musical scene where Mels and other *stilyagi* are joined by 1980s rockers, 2010s punks, and other counterculture groups. Mels and the crowd sing *Shalyay-valyay* by Chaif, with lyrics such as “this style defeats fear” and “go on and play.” Though the song is anachronistic, the lyrics depict much of the borrowed Western idealism that *stilyagi* sought to embody through their own self-expression. Having different generations of countercultures together portrayed the

continuity and evolution of the varying Russian subcultures, each of which built off of the prior group and took on new Western elements. The *stilyagi* represented in *Hipsters* laid the foundation for individuals like Victor Tsoi and Mike Naumenko to create their music thirty years later.

Conversely, the characters of *Leto* are aware of their distance from the West and how they must rely on their imagination to mimic it. In one scene between Mike and Natalia, they discuss a video filmed in Vyborg that wishes to emulate England. Natalia says “it’s probably nothing like England” and Mike responds that it is “not quite Soviet, not quite Western. It’s like some third place.” Mike’s assertion, while specifically about a place, can also extend to how rockers such as himself existed. Mike and his musical counterparts lived uniquely *vyne*.

The film *Leto* also explores how to disseminate Soviet rock abroad. Zoopark, Mike’s band, toys around with the idea of making their music available to Americans. During this discussion, Mike is vehemently opposed to sharing it with the United States/West. Mike does not know what his music shows and believes it would be in the shadows of music made by big Western groups such as The Doors and The Beatles. Soviet rock as a genre can be considered innovative in Russia specifically, and Mike’s music can be seen as original, but if he were included in the broad, global rock category, that may no longer be the case. The prospect of introducing it to the West and subsequently having some scope of influence elicits an inferiority complex within Mike. Viewers watch him spin out, surrounded by walls of American and English records. This scene suggests the impact Western music has made on Mike and other Soviet rock musicians. Mike does not see his music adding anything new to global rock music since it has already been done and he cannot discern whether it would appear as a flattery or mockery of those great Western rock albums seen on the walls.

Western Influence as an Enemy

Throughout the film *Hipsters*, viewers watch as *stilyagi* like Mels and Bob find and make bone records of iconic jazz records, like Charlie Parker, since the official vinyls of Western jazz music were prohibited. The portrayal of how bone records were made, as well as how severely banned jazz music was in the Soviet Union, is accurate in this movie, as explored earlier in this paper. Furthermore, scholar Yana Meerzon (2011) comments that jazz music in 1950s Russia represented a “cold denial” of Soviet society’s absurd reality, as listeners/*stilyagi* like Mels would seek for the “real life” shared in jazz music. Thus, the bone records were a symbol of liberation and jazz was seen as a threat to “regime’s ideology but also of its restrictive stylistic policies.” Even with such legal restrictions, the transmission of ideas and culture from the West made its way to Russia. It is also worth re-emphasizing that even in the process of seeking and accepting Western influences, many things that were adopted could still remain uniquely Russian. For instance, bone records are a uniquely Soviet creation (Czerny 2021), so the transmission of Western idealism was not simply about copying the West but making it work in the Soviet context.

However, most Soviets did not want any Western influence, regardless of whether it was restructured for Soviet life. Komsomol members in the film are heard saying “every *stilyagi* is a potential criminal... it’s only one step from saxophone to the knife,” and Polly’s mom refers to her as “a spy,” highlighting how big of a threat *stilyagi* and the West were deemed to be to traditional Soviet society. Bob’s father more directly enunciated to viewers and Bob that “criminal prosecution for “idolization of the West” has not been abolished,” showing what specifically about *stilyagi* was dangerous. Ironically, Bob’s father’s comment foreshadows Bob’s

arrest towards the end of the movie when caught trying to buy American records from a visiting American citizen. Simply seeking out Western music is threatening to the state because of what the idealized West represents, as discussed above.

Similarly, even though there is the Leningrad Rock Club during the film *Leto*, there is a significant amount of resistance and limitations in how the music can be experienced. The film begins with the owners of the club locking up doors and windows to prevent people from getting in, meanwhile viewers watch individuals get smuggled into the show through the bathrooms. Even in a place designated to embrace rock music (and the Western influence that brought the genre to life), there are individuals surveilling and correcting behavior. Members of the crowd have to remain seated for the duration of the concerts and there are security staff who monitor the movements of the crowd. Later during the film, Mike and his band accompany Victor to get approval to play the club from the owners. In their own words, the club owners see the point of the club “To show that rock music isn't for the gutters and dives.” When the owners hear Victor’s music, they deem it as being for the gutters. He is only allowed to play his song if they mark it as comedy/parody. Victor does not have much else choice on where he can play his music, so that is the deal he must accept. The club owners still have the residual, subconscious cultural opposition to rock music due to the Western influence, and they wish to contain its spread and avoid rogue individuals. Soviet officials did not want another generation of *stilyagi*.

Supradiegetic Scenes as Social Commentary

During the two time periods, the countercultures represented in *Hipsters* and *Leto* were not always able to directly express their motives or separation from the traditional cultures of the time. With the *stilyagi* in *Hipsters* specifically, much of their statements were made by their

self-expression and focus on self, as opposed to collective, organized actions against the ruling culture. Then, Soviet rockers like Victor and Mike in *Leto* leaned more into a passive, beatnik archetype than an active political agitator in society. With the characters in both films having more indirect comments than direct ones on society and culture, the manipulation of diegesis and musical numbers becomes an important method for the directors to make bolder statements, versus simply having films that are period pieces. The musical genre and elements in both films allow for easy interpolation of anachronistic and trans/supradeiegetic music to make the comments that are otherwise unrealistic to be included from the characters in those time periods.

Unlike *Leto*, *Hipsters* incorporates Western rock music that is anachronistic. As pointed out by Milàn Czerny (2021), the use of Soviet rock music by groups such as Zoopark and Kino (both represented in the film *Leto*) allows “Valery Todorovsky [to] draw parallels between the *stilyagi* of the 1950s and the Soviet rock of groups of the 1980s.” Meerzon (2011) also points out the “musical collage” of the periods is intentional since “the *stilyagi* did not leave any original artistic work.” Once again, there is a continuity of the work accomplished by the different generations of countercultures. While the *stilyagi* may not have left a lasting imprint during their own time period, their legacy is best seen through those who came afterwards. With the foundation being laid down by *stilyagi*, Soviet rockers (as depicted in *Leto*) could more freely embrace Western music during perestroika. The ideals of both movements overlap, and thus the 1980s songs can aid in the storytelling of *Hipsters*.

One of the first musical numbers in *Hipsters* is to the song *Ya to, chto nad* (I am what is above) by 1980s Soviet rock band Bravo as Mels shops for new clothes. While the song on its own is more likely asking for a potential partner to be interested in the singer, in the context of the scene it provides a different meaning for the plot. Lyrics such as “give me just one chance

and you will know I'm the goods" refer to the *stilyagi* fashion style, as this is when Mels begins his experimentation with the lifestyle. Having this as a musical scene is also far more engaging than simply having Mels look at clothes.

A more politically charged use of anachronistic rock music occurs towards the end of the film, with the use of *Skovanniye odnoy tsyep'yoo* (Bound by one chain) by Nautilus Pompilius. Viewers watch as Mels enters a classroom filled with Komsomol members as the only *stilyagi*, while Katya stands at the front of the room. She goes on to single out Mels to the other Komsomol for being a traitor. Katya sings the Nautilus Pompilius song, thus having the lyrics represent the Komsomol and Soviet ideals. The lyrics "forged together with one chain, tied with one aim" emphasize the collectivist principles Komsomol youth like Katya are conditioned to believe: the group goals are more important than any individual interests. Generally, the song is not meant to be delivered from the point of view of the Communists and some of the lyrics are changed. As Meerzon (2011) discusses, the original lyrics and song represent how political surveillance (such as that performed by the Komsomol) infiltrates their society. The first line of the actual song states "Collective responsibility smears like soot," so there is an irony to Katya singing a version of this song to scold Mels for embracing individualism as a *stilyagi*.

One of the most notable supradiegetic musical scenes in *Leto* is the first bus scene. Mike, Victor, and all of their band members are on a bus when an older gentleman begins to argue with one of the band members, Punk. The older gentleman on the bus is yelling at Punk saying "The state has taught you. What for? You sing the songs of our ideological enemy" and ultimately wants to get him thrown off the bus. An off-duty KGB officer has them separated and, at this point, Skeptic enters the frame to transition viewers to the supradiegetic by saying "Upon the request of many listeners, we'll now play a song by the band Talking Heads entitled Psycho

Killer.” He begins to read off the starting lyrics of the song in Russian, showing the mixing of the Western with the Russian. The entire bus joins in a singing and fighting montage. As mentioned by Justin Wilmes (2024), these dramatic musical scenes serve as “enjoyment for its own sake.” Wilmes also points out this performance serves as a way for characters to vent and progress through their own emotions. This must be done in a fantastical gap/universe of the film because it is not possible to acknowledge these frustrations in the repressed Soviet timeline without being arrested. The lyrics of Psycho Killer provide further meaning as well. The song ostensibly is about the mental psyche of a murderer, but takes on new meanings in the bus scene. The lyrics “run, run, run” take a very literal and ironic approach to the scene, since the band should be running away from the angry traditional Soviets. van Nimwegen (2019) points out it also metaphorically indicates the rockers’ desire to run away from the restrictiveness in the Soviet Union.

Verdict

The films *Hipsters* and *Leto* offer unique musical portrayals of Soviet subcultures and their relationship with Western ideals. Both films utilize musical elements and the Soviet rock genre to evoke the aspirations and struggles of their respective countercultures. *Hipsters* depicts the *stilyagi's* fascination with jazz and how it is a symbol of Western idealism. The film also relies on anachronistic Soviet rock music in supradiegetic scenes to connect the 1950s *stilyagi* with future Russian countercultures. Meanwhile, *Leto* delves into the Soviet rock scene of the 1980s, where musicians like Victor Tsoi and Mike Naumenko create their own rock anthems in light of Western rock music, as well as the limitations imposed by Soviet authorities. Unlike *Hipsters*, *Leto* utilizes Western rock music in its musical supradiegetic scenes. Through the

musical scenes in both films, the filmmakers impart social commentary on the clash between tradition and modernity as well as the role of Western music in Soviet society. When watching these movies as being in conversation with one another, viewers can understand the enduring legacy of Soviet youth countercultures.

Conclusion

Throughout the Soviet Union, multiple youth countercultures developed to reimagine life under a repressive regime. Specifically, *stilyagi* and the Soviet rock movement were examined in depth. *Stilyagi* originated in the 1940s, following the end of World War II, with young men obsessed with style and Western jazz. *Stilyagi* were innovative in their pursuit of Western media, creating bone music. In the following decades, as *stilyagi* disappeared, Beatlemania and other Western rock influenced the subsequent counterculture: Soviet rock. Russians and rockers alike desired to have their own Beatles, but state restrictions delayed their success. Importantly, *stilyagi* and rockers were apolitical, despite the state treating them as political enemies.

As the Soviet Union adopted policies of perestroika and glasnost, Soviet rock music was able to take center stage, with the support of the film industry. Perestroika cinema and directors had a mutually beneficial relationship with rock musicians, with musicians setting the film scores and acting. Perestroika films depicted rockers as typical youth heroes and legitimized their music before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Decades later, post-Soviet musical films like *Hipsters* and *Leto* revisited the *stilyagi* and rock countercultures. These films retroactively painted the movements as more revolutionary, largely through the song choice and manipulation of diegesis. Songs selected were anachronistic or borrowed from the West, with those songs making social commentary the movements were unable to do on their own. The films also operate to inspire

change for the generations under Putin, the modern Russian repressive regime. While perestroika and post-Soviet cinema depict the youth countercultures differently, the reality of their Western and political influence exists somewhere in the middle.

While not their goal, the apolitical rockers and *stilyagi* of their generation inadvertently pushed ‘the needle’ for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even without intentional political action, *stilyagi* and rockers’ existence became political as they were targeted by the state. Rockers predominantly operated within the frames of Soviet rule, but it was difficult for the state to separate rockers’ Western musical influences from them. As Western ideology permeated to *stilyagi* and rockers, it became difficult for the state to contain or ignore. Eventually, Soviet leadership had little choice but to co-opt the youth desire for Western-music, as seen with VIA and the Leningrad Rock Club. In doing so, Soviet leadership allowed for the erosion of Soviet culture, and ultimately the Soviet Union.

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