

Visualized Freedom:  
The Film Musical as Western Utopia in *Leto* (2018)

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## Introduction

“You sing the enemy’s songs!”<sup>1</sup> An unknown man on the train scolds a group of young rock musicians, his voice filled with disdain. While the police chase the youth through the carriages, one of the rebellious rockers sings the hit song ‘Psycho Killer’ by the American band Talking Heads.<sup>2</sup> It is the first of *Leto*’s (2018) three musical sequences which characterize and give meaning to this Russian film musical about what it was like to be part of the underground rock subculture in Leningrad in the early 1980s.

*Leto* (Russian for ‘summer’) follows Viktor Tsoy, singer and guitarist in Kino, generally considered one of Russia’s most popular and influential rock bands.<sup>3</sup> While the film tells the story of the love triangle that emerges over the summer between Viktor, his friend and Zoopark-frontman Mayk Naumenko, and Mayk’s wife Natalia ‘Natasha’ Naumenko, the political climate wherein the characters live and make music is much more interesting about this film. *Leto* is not the first film made about Viktor Tsoy and Kino. Several documentaries about Tsoy’s work exist, which makes sense considering that Kino found relative fame even under Soviet rule before he died in a car crash in 1990. These include the short *The End of the Holidays* (1986), *The Final Concert* (1990), *Sunny Days* (1996), and the more recent *You Just Want To Know* (2007)<sup>4</sup> – all of which are difficult to find in Western Europe. *Leto*, by Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov, is remarkably different. It is not a documentary film nor a rockumentary, but Tsoy’s story is cast into a fascinatingly American genre: the film musical.

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<sup>1</sup> *Leto*, directed by Kirill Serebrennikov (Moscow: Hype Film/Kinovista, 2018), screener, 00:21:48.

<sup>2</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:07-00:26:16.

<sup>3</sup> William Jay Risch, “Introduction,” in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> David MacFadyen, “The Russian ‘Rockumentary’: Documentary Films and Rock, Pop, and Chanson,” *The Russian Review* 69.4 (2010), 677.

The film musical has traditionally been dominated by Hollywood. The film genre first developed in Hollywood in the 1920s, and soon became an example for other national cinemas to look towards.<sup>5</sup> Since then, “no national cinema has produced any body of film musicals to compete with the sustained output of Hollywood.”<sup>6</sup> While a resulting predominantly American focus in academic writing may very well be explained – on the basis of this dominance as well as on the fact that many theorists writing in English work in the United States – this does in no way justify ignoring other musical cinemas, especially considering their worldwide popularity.<sup>7</sup>

The first reason for specifically discussing the Russian film musical *Leto*, is that the film’s subject matter is explicitly tied to a tension between Russian and American culture and policies. This tension between American and local cultures can be detected in all international musical films employing the Hollywood model, yet is heavily underexposed in academia. Previous studies have failed to adequately address what the use of a typically American genre might signify in non-Western films. Yet, the use of a film genre that is so typically based on and tied to an American tradition is essential to the meaning *Leto*’s musical scenes transfer to the audience. Secondly, *Leto* is a self-reflective musical in the sense that one specific character of the film, Skeptic, comments on the artificial character of these musical scenes, hinting at their utopian quality. As film musicals present their musical numbers “in an imaginary space [...] contained within a narrative framework,”<sup>8</sup> I wish to argue in this thesis that *Leto*’s surrealist musical moments constitute not just an escape from the film’s narrative, but that in these moments wherein the storyline is temporarily halted speaks a longing for Western musical freedom unattainable for the film’s characters. The utopian musical scenes

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Traubner, Thomas L. Gayda, and John Snelson, 2001, “Film Musical,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, accessed July 3, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad, “Introduction,” in *The International Film Musical*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1.

are set in direct opposition to the bleak reality of early 1980s Soviet restrictions on musical practices. The main question this thesis answers is therefore the following: how does *Leto*'s genre, being the film musical, represent a utopian longing for Western musical freedom?

In order to answer this question, the first chapter comprises of the theoretical framework and methodology. It describes the current state of academic knowledge on the topic of contemporary Russian film musicals and critically evaluate the relevant sources related to this fairly niche subject in English-language literature. I will then present my methods to study the film at hand, borrowing mainly from film studies, popular music studies and film music studies, with a considerable role set aside for Anahid Kassabian's concepts. The second chapter focuses in more detail on the film's protagonists and plot, providing a broader description of musical life in the early 1980s Soviet Russia and positioning the American music employed in the musical scenes within that historic setting. The following sub-question will be answered in this chapter: how was Anglo-American pop and rock music received in the early 1980s Leningrad? As Barry Keith Grant argues in relation to the Hollywood musical and rock 'n' roll, "any analysis of the film musical is necessarily incomplete without a consideration of the genre's relation to developments in popular music."<sup>9</sup> The third and fourth chapter concern itself with *Leto* as an American film musical and the utopian status of the film musical genre. In order to illustrate how the musical scenes constitute a utopian realm, I discuss all three musical scenes in *Leto*, hereinafter referred to as: the Psycho Killer-sequence,<sup>10</sup> The Passenger-sequence<sup>11</sup> and the Perfect Day-sequence.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Talking Heads' 'Psycho Killer', *Leto* features Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger' and 'Perfect Day' by Lou Reed.

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Keith Grant, "The Classic Hollywood Musical and the 'Problem' of Rock 'n' Roll," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13.4 (1986), 204.

<sup>10</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:07-00:26:16.

<sup>11</sup> *Leto*, 00:42:18-00:45:50.

<sup>12</sup> *Leto*, 01:14:22-01:09:13.

Precisely because I come from an outsider perspective (practically unacquainted with both Russian film and Soviet society, yet well-acquainted with Western rock music and the film musical genre), I am capable of making claims on the more universal effect this film may have on international Western audiences. All names are on the basis of the common spelling for the characters' names as given in the film's end credits. All translations of Russian spoken in the film are done by me with the help of Google Translate, and tested on accuracy against the official Dutch subtitling for the film by Lilian van Opdorp.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Leto*, 02:03:53.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

While the genre is considered one of the most popular across world cinema,<sup>14</sup> the definition of the genre term film musical has been subject to debate.<sup>15</sup> Richard Traubner, Thomas L. Gayda and John Snelson define the film musical as “a film that includes musical numbers (songs, ensembles, dances) that are usually integrated (though not always closely) with the plot.”<sup>16</sup> Barry Keith Grant’s definition of film musicals as “films that involve the performance of song and/or dance by the main characters and also include singing and/or dancing as an important element”<sup>17</sup> places more focus on the characters, rather than the plot, but its essence is roughly the same. Most songs in a film musical have a relatively simple structure with a clear sense of tonal direction: they adhere to the popular AABA-structured 32-bar form, emphasized by lyrics in a rhyming pattern.<sup>18</sup> *Leto* is a film musical in all of these aspects (it includes pop songs, sung by the main characters as well as bystanders, in scenes which are integrated with the plot), and should therefore be discussed as one. Films that include only occasional musical numbers<sup>19</sup> or musical performances not by any members of the ensemble cast, and films with music that does not find its origin with the film’s characters, are often referred to as musical films rather than film musicals.<sup>20</sup>

### The Hollywood film musical

The dominant type of film musical has, since the 1920s, been the Hollywood film musical, as Hollywood “benefited from the global dissemination of American culture through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>21</sup> Focus in academic writing has been predominantly American as well, starting in

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<sup>14</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>15</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Traubner, Gayda, and Snelson, “Film Musical.”

<sup>17</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Heather Laing, “Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical,” in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Traubner, Gayda, and Snelson, “Film Musical.”

<sup>20</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Traubner, Gayda, and Snelson, “Film Musical.”

the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Any writing on musical performances in film must acknowledge the academic genre's pioneers, whose work is grounded in genre studies: Rick Altman and Jane Feuer. Feuer's exploration of the American entertainment tradition in *The Hollywood Musical* (1982)<sup>23</sup> and Altman's taxonomy of the genre's characteristics and historical development in *The American Film Musical* (1987)<sup>24</sup> are considered standards works on the genre, as is Gerald Mast's *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (1987).<sup>25</sup> Altman's edited collection *Genre: The Musical* (1981), with therein included Richard Dyer's influential ideas on the relationship between entertainment and utopia<sup>26</sup> and Martin Sutton's exploration of imagination and meaning in the musical,<sup>27</sup> has also become a canonical volume. This early writing on the genre of musicals mostly concerned historical overviews.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the 2000s, critics started to approach musicals "in terms of identity politics, considering how musicals represent class, race, gender, and sexuality."<sup>29</sup> Barry Keith Grant's *The Hollywood Film Musical* (2012) is such a recent publication on the subject. This book features close analytical readings of a number of American film musicals, although Grant did write about rock 'n roll in the Hollywood musical as early as 1986.<sup>30</sup> Before his anthology, however, others had used interdisciplinary approaches for their cinematic research, including John Mundy's *Popular Music on Screen* (1999), Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell's edited

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<sup>22</sup> Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, "Introduction," in *Film's Musical Moments*, eds. Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 2; Creekmur and Mokdad, "Introduction," 4; Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, "Introduction," in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 1; Nina Penner, "Rethinking the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction in the Film Musical," *Music and the Moving Image* 10.3 (2017), 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical – Second Edition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982/1993), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (New York, NY: Overlook Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman, 175-189 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> Martin Sutton, "Patterns of Meaning in the Musical," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman, 190-196 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Grant, "Musical and the 'Problem' of Rock 'n' Roll."

collection *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (2000), Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight's edited collection *Soundtrack Available* (2001) and Ian Inglis's *Popular Music and Film* (2003), all of which include the Hollywood film musical, or at least films featuring what we would now call 'musical moments', in their list of topics. 'Musical moments' is a term coined by Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell in 2006 to refer to musical scenes included in films of genres other than just film musicals.<sup>31</sup> This term helped open up conversation on how to think and write about musical scenes. Though the history of the Hollywood film has by now been well documented,<sup>32</sup> academia's focus remains mostly on the same few older film musicals rather than contemporary versions - which have been largely omitted in the discourse. Publications such as Steven Cohan's edited collection *The Sound of Musicals* (2010) are important modern reassessments of the film musical, including contemporary musicals in their broad assessments of the genre.<sup>33</sup> Kevin J. Donnelly and Beth Carroll's recently published *Contemporary Musical Film* (2019) also studies a variety of contemporary musicals. Books such as these show that writing on Hollywood film musicals is very slowly starting to catch up with modern times. Writing on Russian film musicals, in the mean time, is severely lagging behind, as those writing on contemporary musical film continue to blatantly ignore the international, specifically foreign language, variations on the American genre. Its authors instead focus unquestioningly on the direct, English-language offspring of the Hollywood film musical, upholding their western-focused discourse.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Conrich and Tincknell, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>32</sup> Kevin J. Donnelly and Beth Carroll, *Contemporary Musical Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Cohan, *The Sound Of Musicals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Donnelly and Carroll, *Contemporary Musical Film*.

## Russian film musicals

Turning to foreign film studies in hopes of finding material on Russian film musicals is an endeavor just as futile. In fact, in addition to being under-examined in general, the only Russian films somewhat frequently discussed are those originating from the Soviet period. The small amount of writing available in English on Russian film musicals unsurprisingly takes the Stalinist musical comedy as its topic. This is, as the following examples will show, the only genre and period wherein sound has received significant scholarly attention at all. Yet, even within this genre the focus has been quite narrow: “scholars have not gone far beyond the films directed by Grigori Alexandrov and, to a lesser degree, Ivan Pyriev.”<sup>35</sup>

Trudy Anderson was quick to write on Russian musical films in 1995, answering the very crucial question ‘why Stalinist musicals?’<sup>36</sup> She reasons that Stalinist musicals enjoyed major popularity in their time because of their escapist qualities.<sup>37</sup> She strengthens her argumentation with a discussion of the filmic operations of Stalinist musicals. Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad’s *The International Film Musical* (2013) does invaluable work in assessing the range of musicals in non-Hollywood contexts through a collection of essays on different film musical traditions around the world.<sup>38</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad explain how writing on foreign film musicals was previously stored in unfamiliar locations, outside other discussions of the film genre, making it difficult to track down.<sup>39</sup> Their collection of essays includes writing by Richard Taylor on musicals in the Soviet Union. His essay sketches the basic outlines of the topography of the Stalinist musical in the first half of the twentieth century, through examination of a number of musicals by the fathers of the Stalinist

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<sup>35</sup> Masha Salazkina, “Introduction,” in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, eds. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Trudy Anderson, “Why Stalinist Musical?” *Discourse* 17.3 (Spring 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, “Stalinist Musical,” 40.

<sup>38</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction.”

<sup>39</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction,” 3.

musical genre, the aforementioned and well-represented Alexandrov and Pyriev.<sup>40</sup> Another essay by Richard Taylor on the same topic, arguing roughly the same case, was included in *A Companion to Russian Cinema* (2016).<sup>41</sup> This collection by Birgit Beumers provides histories of Russian cinema: pre-Revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet feature films. Beumers' collection is not the first on that topic; in fact, there have been many such collections, histories, surveys, case studies and textbooks. As mentioned, they, like Beumers' collection, rarely – if ever – include film music, let alone film musicals made in the post-Soviet era.<sup>42</sup> Jason R. Hillebrand gives an account of jazz music incorporated in *Jolly Fellows* (1934), another Soviet musical film, in the broader framework of a collection on jazz in the film soundtrack edited by Emile Wennekes and Emilio Audissino. Once again, the topic is a Soviet rather than a modern Russian musical film.<sup>43</sup>

Lilya Kaganovksy and Masha Salazkina's *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema* (2014) brings together essays addressing different aspects of sound in the context of Soviet and post-Soviet film culture.<sup>44</sup> One very valuable and relevant chapter in their book is "Russian Rock on Soviet Bones," written by Lilya Kaganovsky, wherein she discusses the modern Russian musical *The Hipsters* (2008). This musical, like *Leto*, relies on new versions of previously recorded songs.<sup>45</sup> In her discussion of the Soviet counterculture movement of the mid-1950s, a group exposed for the first time to movies, music, and fashion from the West, Kaganovsky focuses on how this film is a musical "in the Hollywood sense of

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Taylor, "Soviet Union," in *The International Film Musical*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Taylor, "The Stalinist Musical: Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Birgit Beumers, ed., *A Companion to Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Jason R. Hillebrand, "A Song Helps Us Live: The Narrative Function of Jazz in the Soviet Musical Film *Jolly Fellows*," in *Cinema Changes: Incorporations of Jazz in the Film Soundtrack*, eds. Emile Wennekes and Emilio Audissino (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina, eds., *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky, "Russian Rock on Soviet Bones," in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, eds. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

the genre.”<sup>46</sup> She is, in fact, the first to compare and contrast the Soviet musical comedy with the typically Western Hollywood model. She argues in favour of considering the two as separate genres because they are so different: the Stalinist musical comedy was always made so that the audience would recognize themselves, while the Hollywood film musical is per definition escapist.<sup>47</sup>

### Popular music in film

*Leto* is not *just* a Russian film musical; it is a film operating in a typically American film genre. On top of that, *Leto* strengthens its ties to Western film practices through its use of Anglo-American popular music in its musical scenes. This makes its soundtrack a compiled score. Anahid Kassabian argues that compiled scores “offer affiliating identifications” which in turn produce and reproduce meaning.<sup>48</sup> But before Kassabian coined these useful terms to talk about the use of music pre-dating the film, others did write about the topic.

Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton, in their *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies since the 50s* (1995), spoke of viewers watching films with their “jukebox ready loaded, waiting only for the film-maker to hit the right buttons.”<sup>49</sup> In essence, film viewers are capable of assigning meaning to pre-existing music used in a film through using their so-called ‘celluloid jukebox’. This serves as a database of all music they are familiar with, which in turn offers affiliating identifications: all music is “filtered through our knowledge of the cultural codes.”<sup>50</sup> Mark Kermode, in that same collection, focuses specifically on the effects of pop and rock music in movies.<sup>51</sup> He makes two primarily useful points: first, how the

<sup>46</sup> Kaganovsky, “Russian Rock,” 253.

<sup>47</sup> Kaganovsky, “Russian Rock,” 258.

<sup>48</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (London: Routledge, 2001), 4-7.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton, “Introduction,” in *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies since the 50s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (London: BFI Publishing, 1995), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Romney and Wootton, *Celluloid Jukebox*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Kermode, “Twisting the Knife,” in *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies since the 50s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton, 8-19 (London: BFI Publishing, 1995).

music can either accompany, counterpoint, boost or comment upon the film's images;<sup>52</sup> second, how it is "a disposable, transient product which reflects, mimics and occasionally shapes the *zeitgeist*. As such, pop music can serve as a film's memory, instantaneously linking it with its audience, tapping into a nostalgic past, or fixing the film firmly in the present."<sup>53</sup> Familiar songs can help the audience make their own a past or location they never experienced,<sup>54</sup> argue Arthur Knight and Pamela Robertson Wojcik in their edited collection *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* (2001). They too, like Kassabian and Romney and Wootton, stress not just "popular music's role in film" but also "people's experience of it."<sup>55</sup> Lauren Anderson's examination of two recent case studies, *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* (1997) and *Sliding Doors* (1998), shows her understanding of the "'functions' and the 'viewer responses' that are 'cued' by the text."<sup>56</sup> She takes into account the fact that there are as many different potential interpretations as there are individual listeners. In 2003, Ian Inglis coined another collection on the topic, calling it *Popular Music and Film*.<sup>57</sup> One of the issues he mentions with regards to the academic approach towards popular music in film, is how "there remains a degree of uncertainty about the appropriate perspective from which popular music and film ought to be approached and analysed."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Kermode, "Twisting the Knife," 9.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Kermode, "Twisting the Knife," 9.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Knight and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, eds, *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>55</sup> Knight and Robertson Wojcik, *Soundtrack Available*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Lauren Anderson, "Case Study 1: *Sliding Doors* and *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives*," in *Popular Music and Film*, ed. Ian Inglis, (New York, NY; London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 105.

<sup>57</sup> Ian Inglis, ed. *Popular Music and Film* (New York, NY; London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Ian Inglis, "Introduction: Popular Music and Film," in *Popular Music and Film*, ed. Ian Inglis (New York, NY; London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 3.

## Methodology

As Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad indicate, work on film musicals in an international context has to draw upon “interdisciplinary work in area studies, dance, ethnomusicology, mass communications, film studies and cultural studies in order to confront the complex constellation of music, dance, narrative, technology and global economics that defines the international musical form.”<sup>59</sup> As little has been written on exactly *Leto*’s combination of American music in a contemporary Russian film employing a typically American film genre, which is somewhere in between film studies, popular music studies and film music studies, I will be borrowing from all these disciplines in order to examine all relevant aspects of culture, music and the moving image relevant for my research.

In order to begin to understand the relevance of Anglo-American (rock) music in Russia at a time when it was not officially in circulation, it is useful to begin our examination with a thorough look at how this foreign Western music circulated in Leningrad through a historical overview, as will be provided in the next chapter. For us to understand how it passes on meaning to the viewers of *Leto*, Lauren Anderson’s examination of popular music in film as acquiring meaning through sound, lyrics, secondary connotations and context is a useful framework with which to describe the different aspects of the American music used in the film. The ‘sound’ of a song is defined as tone of voice and instrumentation, which is often described in terms of musical genre.<sup>60</sup> Lyrics refers to all sung text in a song. Secondary connotations may refer to “broader social codes that influence the reading or decoding of a text,”<sup>61</sup> which is closely tied to the viewers’ pre-existing associations with the music, while context is associated with the new filmic context in which the familiar song appears.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, “Case Study 1,” 104.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, “Case Study 1,” 104.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson, “Case Study 1,” 104-105.

Anahid Kassabian's influential book *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (2001) is considered a game-changer in the field of film music analysis. I believe her writing to be incredibly useful in the context of *Leto* because of her attention to the filmgoers' engagement with the musical material: as she argues, "identifications with films [...] are conditioned by filmgoers' relationships to a wide range of musics both within and outside of their filmgoing practices."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the pre-composed musical number in a film musical specifically has "a separate life outside the film, as well as a narrative role within in"<sup>64</sup> which communicates with the viewers' previous relationship to the music, while the film musical as a genre in itself speaks to the viewers' filmgoing practices. What Kassabian argues is not far off Anderson's concept of secondary connotations. While Anderson's concepts are useful in the succeeding chapter on the influence of Anglo-American music in Soviet Russia and the emergence of Russian rock, Kassabian's model is much more useful in terms of discussing *Leto* as a whole. While Anderson's analysis only can be applied to the specific songs employed in the film, Kassabian's terminology is useful for discussing also the other tracks of the film (visual images, dialogue, sound effects, and silence) as well as the meanings communicated by the Hollywood film musical as a genre. She terms connotations that specific songs (or as I argue, film genres) carry "affiliating identifications" that help listeners produce meaning within the narrative context.<sup>65</sup> According to Kassabian, one "instance of music has various relationships:

- To other music, both within the same film and more generally;
- To the narrative and the world it creates; and
- To other tracks of the film (visual images, dialogue, sound effects)."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Laing, "Emotion by Numbers," 9.

<sup>65</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 3-7.

<sup>66</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 11.

It is after this model by Kassabian that I structure my argumentation: first, I establish the relationship of the American music to the other music in the film as well as relate it to the situation in early 1980s Leningrad and the film's narrative; then, I relate this music used in the musical scenes to the larger whole which influences all other tracks of the film, namely the Hollywood film musical genre.

## Chapter 2: Rock on Russian Soil

In *Leto*, we hear characters mention The Beatles and the Sex Pistols,<sup>67</sup> we watch Mayk Naumenko translate Sex Pistols' song lyrics to Russian<sup>68</sup> and copy album covers by David Bowie and Blondie,<sup>69</sup> we see Mayk and Viktor listen to a record by The Velvet Underground.<sup>70</sup> Everything testifies that English-language music from the United States as well as the United Kingdom plays a big part in the characters' lives. In order to understand the influence of this foreign music, this chapter outlines a brief history of English-language – Anglo-American specifically – music in Russia and its influence on Russian rock artists and consumers in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, as well as the restricted musical possibilities Russian musicians had under the censorship of the Soviet regime. After all, we must not forget that rock music in the Soviet Union was first and foremost a Western import.<sup>71</sup> Speaking in Kassabian's terms, this chapter discusses the film music's relation to other music as well as to the narrative world it creates, as I connect these universal claims on rock music in Russia to specific examples from the film.

### Rock in Russia

Stalin's death in 1953 brought on the beginning of very gradual deterioration of social realism.<sup>72</sup> The influence of Western (youth) culture was still relatively weak, even throughout the 1960s, due to Russia's "cultural and ideological isolation."<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, each political upheaval in the Soviet bloc set forth further de-ideologisation.<sup>74</sup> Jim Riordan, writing in 1988, saw 1964 as a crucial turning point in the deteriorating political climate under Brezhnev.

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<sup>67</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:50-00:21:56.

<sup>68</sup> *Leto*, 00:15:50-00:16:20.

<sup>69</sup> *Leto*, 00:26:22-00:26:43.

<sup>70</sup> *Leto*, 00:32:50-00:35:06.

<sup>71</sup> Polly McMichael, "'After All, You're a Rock and Roll Star (At Least, That's What They Say)': Roksi and the Creation of the Soviet Rock Musician," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83.4 (2005), 664.

<sup>72</sup> Jolanta Pekacz, "Did Rock Smash The Wall? The Role of Rock in Political Transition," *Popular Music* 13.1 (1994), 43.

<sup>73</sup> Jim Riordan, "Soviet Youth: Pioneers of Change," *Soviet Studies* 40.4 (1988), 561.

<sup>74</sup> Pekacz, "Rock in Political Transition," 43.

From that year onwards, the younger generation began to turn away from the official Russian culture, instead looking towards Western youth culture wherein “rock music defined many components of youth subculture such as fashion, clothing and lifestyles.”<sup>75</sup> The mid-1960s saw the emergence of the first Russian rock bands, many of which played mainly cover versions of songs by The Beatles on an amateur level.<sup>76</sup> This became possible because de-ideologisation meant “freer and wider openings to culture (not always of the best quality) from behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>77</sup>

Overall, however, the authorities’ response to non-Soviet music, lasting until the mid-1980s, was to expose it as bourgeois propaganda and attempt to suppress these aspects of alien culture, while reinforcing the monopoly of Soviet youth organizations and inculcating a newfound faith in Soviet patriotism.<sup>78</sup> After all, Western culture was seen as a threat, and American pop music in particular could express “American national values of democracy, freedom, and open exchange of goods and services”<sup>79</sup> if you were to put it in a positive wording; Soviet officials would rather refer to Western ideology as “hedonism” causing young people to waste their time dancing to Western music in discotheques.<sup>80</sup> Timothy W. Ryback has explained how Eastern bloc leaders commonly perceived rock music as a weapon of the West, a threat to communist culture and society.<sup>81</sup> Rock’s idealization of individuality was threatening the Soviet social order because it was beyond Party control.<sup>82</sup> Not only was rock an individual undertaking, but an anti-communist one as well. And so, there was a

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<sup>75</sup> Riordan, “Soviet Youth,” 561.

<sup>76</sup> Yngvar B. Steinholt, “You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” *Popular Music* 22.1 (2003), 91.

<sup>77</sup> Pekacz, “Rock in Political Transition,” 43.

<sup>78</sup> Riordan, “Soviet Youth,” 563.

<sup>79</sup> Jaap Kooijman, “We Are The World: America’s Dominance in Global Pop Culture,” in *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture – Revised Edition*, ed. Jaap Kooijman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>80</sup> Terry Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” *Popular Music* 5 (1985), 141.

<sup>81</sup> Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 103.

reigning “fear of rock as the ideologically foreign ‘product of rotten capitalism’.”<sup>83</sup> Ironically, it was in Russia that in the 1980s enthusiasts still believed in the rock ‘n’ roll myth, while the idea had already died out in the West.<sup>84</sup>

### Underground

In an attempt to counter the threat of rock music, the authorities imposed strict rules on lyrics as well as musical aspects of Russian rock, in addition to limitations on the artists’ appearance and stage presentation.<sup>85</sup> In *Leto*, Kino goes to have its lyrics approved by an official at the Rock Club, Tanja Ivanova, and it takes quite some persuading before Kino allowed to play on the venue’s official stage. The approval comes only when Ivanova is convinced she can pass off Kino’s songs as satire,<sup>86</sup> thereby avoiding the censorship on music that did not actively support the Soviet ideal. The authorities were convinced there could be no immoderate experimentation or innovation in rock music,<sup>87</sup> and instead Viktor’s lyrics get praise for their end-rhyme, which “gives consistency to form and content,” according to Ivanova.<sup>88</sup> Bands and artists that did not adhere precisely to the strict rules ran the risk of being deprived of their public performance rights, at least temporarily.<sup>89</sup> The imposed limitations essentially meant that music had to go underground, which caused many youths to develop “a defiant attitude to Soviet ideology and the older generation.”<sup>90</sup>

Any music officially forbidden was privately circulated on tape, recorded and re-recorded over and over on domestic equipment.<sup>91</sup> Soviet cultural youth practices thus developed almost exclusively in the private sphere rather than the public sphere, with

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<sup>83</sup> Pekacz, “Rock in Political Transition,” 44.

<sup>84</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 95.

<sup>85</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 143-144.

<sup>86</sup> *Leto*, 00:47:35-00:52:00.

<sup>87</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 143.

<sup>88</sup> *Leto*, 00:48:37-00:48:43.

<sup>89</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 143.

<sup>90</sup> Riordan, “Soviet Youth,” 563.

<sup>91</sup> McMichael, ““Rock and Roll Star,”” 666.

enthusiasts “giving private concerts in the apartments of sympathetic acquaintances, swapping recordings and sharing information about Western and local popular music.”<sup>92</sup> Private concerts are shown to take place in living rooms in *Leto* as well.<sup>93</sup> It has been suggested that it was this “subversive, anti-authoritarian image of rock music” that not only helped its popularity with a large audience, but also gave rock music an escapist quality rather than an oppositional one.<sup>94</sup>

### Russian rock

While a broad term, Russian rock is often used to refer to a specific musical style in Russia that developed around 1980. “Russian rock critics slightly differ in their opinions as to which bands and artists could be said to play Russian rock, but their candidates for this category share the following characteristics: they all sing in Russian; most have refused to compromise by pursuing an official, state-sponsored career; they are also conscious of their Russian roots and do not merely copy Anglo-American trends.”<sup>95</sup> In terms of music, Soviet rock musicians were heavily influenced by punk rock and new wave<sup>96</sup> and would generally refer to themselves as playing music within these genres. Mayk and Natasha indeed talk about new wave as encompassing the future of music,<sup>97</sup> and Zoopark’s music is identified by a friend as ‘garagerock’, also a typically British genre at the time.<sup>98</sup> Terry Bright, writing in 1985, suggests these genre indications are only logical, because the Russian rock bands were interested in and influenced by Western counter-culture, they naturally described themselves using the common Western terminology.<sup>99</sup> Even though called Russian ‘rock’, this music

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<sup>92</sup> McMichael, “Rock and Roll Star,” 665.

<sup>93</sup> *Leto*, 00:53:40-01:00:00; *Leto*, 01:33:34-01:35:30.

<sup>94</sup> John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place* (New York, NY; London: Routledge, 2003), 120.

<sup>95</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 104.

<sup>96</sup> Pekacz, “Rock in Political Transition,” 46.

<sup>97</sup> *Leto*, 00:26:52-00:27:10.

<sup>98</sup> *Leto*, 00:10:23-00:10:25.

<sup>99</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 132.

showed more resemblances to the mid- to late-1970s New York new wave scene and to British new wave, post punk, and pop.<sup>100</sup>

While the musical styles were borrowed from the West, this influence was only a foundation on which to build. Russian bands combined the Western new wave they loved with the Russian folk music they grew up around.<sup>101</sup> Traditional folk music's largest influence was on the major role reserved for lyrics in Russian rock.<sup>102</sup> Some possible reasons might be Russian musicians' weaker technical skills, due to a complete lack of formal music training – though it cannot be claimed that all Western rock musicians did have musical training – in addition to an awareness that Russian rockers play a music invented elsewhere. The fact that the commercial and dancing functions of rock never predominated in Russia might also play a role.<sup>103</sup> This comes as no surprise, considering that there was a ban on dancing at concerts until 1987, which was oftentimes enforced by police or KGB present at gigs.<sup>104</sup> Precisely how awkward this situation is, is shown in *Leto* by means of a Zoopark concert at the Rock Club, where the audience sits silently watching, only nodding their heads and occasionally tapping the beat on their knees. When Natasha and her friend hold up a piece of cardboard with a heart drawn on, they are within a single minute corrected by men dressed in dark, sharp suits.<sup>105</sup> After the performance has ended, everyone claps calmly while remaining seated.<sup>106</sup>

### Leningrad rock

The Russian new wave groups became so popular, that the youth gave up re-recording Western groups on a large scale and started taping their native rock stars instead.<sup>107</sup> In this manner, “the absence of marketing and commercial distribution networks did not prevent

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<sup>100</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 93.

<sup>101</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 134-135.

<sup>102</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 96.

<sup>103</sup> Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (London: Omnibus Press, 1987), 34.

<sup>104</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 96.

<sup>105</sup> *Leto*, 00:03:27-00:04:03.

<sup>106</sup> *Leto*, 00:04:40-00:05:00.

<sup>107</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 137.

hundreds of thousands of copied tapes from circulating.”<sup>108</sup> Among these Russian musicians were the popular Leningrad bands Zoopark (alternatively called Zoo) and Kino (alternatively called Cinema),<sup>109</sup> the subjects shown in *Leto* at the start of their respective careers. These groups regularly performed at the Leningrad Rock Club (LRC), under the supervision of the KGB so as to prevent any anti-Soviet activity from taking place.<sup>110</sup> Despite this limiting censorship, the LRC would become “the sole refuge for rock under the repressive policies of the Andropov and Chernenko administrations,” thereby becoming an indispensable link in the web that would help popularize Russian rock in the 1980s leading up to a period of newfound openness.<sup>111</sup> Under Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, Glasnost (openness) meant that Russia changed its attitudes and policies towards the West and Western cultural products.<sup>112</sup> Jim Riordan wrote in 1988 that previously banned groups, including Kino, had by then appeared on television as well as produced albums: “the interest in all new strains of Western pop music [...] has burgeoned, forcing official attitudes to change.”<sup>113</sup>

#### Russian rock and Anglo-American rock in *Leto*

The musical moments in *Leto* are quintessentially representative of a critical moment in Russian history, before Glasnost. Mark Kermode would call *Leto*'s soundtrack a “retrospective use of pop,” as it creates a period location through the use of music popular at the time.<sup>114</sup> In fact, one of the core features of popular music in films is “its strong

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<sup>108</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 95.

<sup>109</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 133.

<sup>110</sup> Bright, “Soviet Crusade against Pop,” 146.

<sup>111</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 92.

<sup>112</sup> Yana Hashamova, “Introduction,” in *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 28.

<sup>113</sup> Riordan, “Soviet Youth,” 563.

<sup>114</sup> Mark Kermode, “Twisting the Knife,” 12.

extratextual associations”<sup>115</sup> with the viewers’ own past, or a past they never experienced but which they make their own “through the familiar language of popular music.”<sup>116</sup>

Looking at the American music used in *Leto*’s musical scenes, the question naturally arises why these specific songs were selected. The Russian rock musicians’ music has been compared to the music of Anglo-Americans like “David Bowie, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, David Byrne, Tom Verlaine, Ian Curtis, Mark E. Smith and Matt Johnson.”<sup>117</sup> Songs by any of these artists would have been able to communicate the connection *Leto*’s characters experience with American music. Their relevance in terms of genre is clear; these are the genres that gave life to Russian rock, these specific artists inspired both Zoopark and Kino, amongst others. What these three have in common is that they are internationally well-known songs, which lyrically interact with the specific film scenes – though not in the exact same way, as Kermode’s terminology of music either accompanying, counterpointing, boosting, or commenting upon the images helps to illustrate.<sup>118</sup> Iggy Pop’s ‘The Passenger’ seems to simply accompany Viktor and Natasha on their journey: a journey which is ordinarily bleak, yet turns adventurous in its musical-treatment.<sup>119</sup> It thus fits well with the fantastical aspects of the film musical, as the next chapter will show. Similarly, ‘Psycho Killer’’s lyrics are about a murderer who occasionally loses control, but the lyrics “run, run, run, away” may be interpreted in light of wanting out of the restrictive Soviet Union; the song thus ironically comments upon the scene.<sup>120</sup> Lou Reed’s ‘Perfect Day’, on the other hand, forms a bleak counterpoint to the images on screen: the lyrics represents everything Mayk does not have at that moment, but wishes he did.<sup>121</sup> The original song was presumably written by Reed to express what he

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<sup>115</sup> Anderson, “Case Study 1,” 114.

<sup>116</sup> Knight and Robertson Wojcik, *Soundtrack Available*, 1.

<sup>117</sup> Steinholt, “Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” 101.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Kermode, “Twisting the Knife,” 9.

<sup>119</sup> *Leto*, 00:42:18-00:45:50.

<sup>120</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:07-00:26:16.

<sup>121</sup> *Leto*, 01:14:22-01:09:13.

longed for in a relationship, rather than what constituted his everyday reality. Again, we can see a form of escapist yearning for what is-not.

On the basis of how *Leto*'s characters discuss both the Western music they love and the Russian rock scene they belong to themselves, we can begin to form an impression of the position Anglo-American rock occupied in early 1980s Leningrad. This chapters has thus outlined what Kassabian sees as the film music's relationship to other music, both within the same film and more generally, as well as the music's relationship to the narrative world of *Leto*'s characters.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 11.

### Chapter 3: *Leto* as Hollywood Film Musical

One should not underestimate the significance of genre in its communication of meanings. Genre, through “a specific set of intertexts (the other films identified by the industry as belonging to the same genre)” controls “the audience’s reaction to any specific film by providing the context in which that film must be interpreted.”<sup>123</sup> By establishing the relationship between the music in *Leto* to the other tracks of the film (visual images, dialogue, sound effects), we can ultimately establish that it is a film musical in all senses of the genre. As the Hollywood film musical format reigns freely as the dominating form, it is the one type every film viewer thinks of upon hearing the term ‘film musical’. Even now, while “the musical style may change, the show tune in constant battle with popular music forms contemporary to the era,”<sup>124</sup> this Hollywood domination of the genre continues to provide a transfer of meanings to each film that makes use of the film musical genre, such as *Leto*.

*Leto* involves a significant number of ‘musical’ scenes, but only these specific three can be identified as ‘musical scenes’. They are quite clearly marked out as such through of a number of aspects. Regular scenes featuring music made by characters, consistently show the source of all musical elements on screen: instruments, speakers, as well as the film’s musicians singing. In scenes where music is played from a record player, the record player is shown on screen. The source is almost always part of the diegesis. In the ‘musical scenes’, however, the source of the instrumental music is never present; only the vocals can be seen to stem directly from the characters. Indeed, the source of the music in film musicals commonly lies outside the diegesis of the film, violating “the rules of realism that govern most other genres.”<sup>125</sup> Moreover, *Leto*’s starring actors other than professional singers Mayk and Viktor are palpably inept at singing.

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<sup>123</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Donnelly and Carroll, *Contemporary Musical Film*, 4.

<sup>125</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 3.

### The film musical as an American genre

Adding to this, performed songs in film musicals, more than soundtrack scores in other (national) film genres, often have a more explicitly local or national form which draws upon “distinct musical, linguistic and cultural traditions, including dance and costume understood as ‘native’ rather than ‘cosmopolitan’,” in addition to the native language employed.<sup>126</sup> As the musical scenes in *Leto* are, in fact, set to American pop music sung in English, this in itself reads as more American than Russian. However, the characters sing their English lines in a clearly foreign accent, sometimes even rendering the lyrics inaudible. Their proficiency level of English is overall low. As a result, in the characters’ attempt to portray American cultural traditions in a universally spoken language, they are actually revealed as ‘foreign’: as native Russian.

The film musical is sometimes called an “unapologetic celebration of entertainment culture,”<sup>127</sup> and Jane Feuer has mentioned how the genre’s main function was to celebrate *American* entertainment.<sup>128</sup> Rick Altman makes a case for the musical sharing “structures and strategies” with numerous other aspects of American life.<sup>129</sup> In all three of *Leto*’s musical scenes, white pen or chalk doodles enter the screen. They spell out parts of the lyrics (sometimes in English, sometimes in Russian) and visualize what the lyrics are talking about. The lyrics relate somewhat to the action portrayed on screen, whether they strengthen what is being said, or whether they quite literally speak of the utopian world the characters long for: “run, run, run, away” in ‘Psycho Killer’,<sup>130</sup> rockets with which to escape in ‘The Passenger’.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>127</sup> Conrich and Tincknell, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>128</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 90.

<sup>129</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:07-00:26:16.

<sup>131</sup> *Leto*, 00:42:18-00:45:50.

All these typically American associations within the film musical genre make for a “productive tension between local and global elements [...] at the heart of all international film musicals, which typically acknowledge their relations to the dominant Hollywood model while claiming their own cultural specificity, traditions and stylistic uniqueness in a national (sometimes distinctly ethnic) realm.”<sup>132</sup> There is a specifically strong argument to make for *Leto* referencing the Hollywood film musical tradition as in fact, *all* international film musicals *always* reference the Hollywood film musical.

### The film musical as an escapist genre

On our way to understanding why the film musical is oftentimes said to express utopian leanings, we must first look at the deviant diegesis of film musicals. Film musicals, as mentioned before, present their musical numbers “in an imaginary space, even if this space is ostensibly a real location, and contained within a narrative framework,”<sup>133</sup> which interrupts the film’s narrative flow, or at the least provides a break from it.<sup>134</sup> Within this imaginary space, Rick Altman notes, time stands still.<sup>135</sup> These imaginary musical spaces are unique to the genre of film musical, making it the only genre that foregrounds “its nature as generic construct,” thereby demanding “the greatest suspension of disbelief from the viewer.”<sup>136</sup> The film musical genre is nonetheless, or maybe because of this, a great vehicle for storytelling: the film musical genre is capable of expressing “a sense of our desire (in the musical numbers) while at the same time safely containing it socially (in the narrative).”<sup>137</sup>

The first indication that *Leto*’s musical scenes do not form part of the larger story of the film, is that the events portrayed are oftentimes quite unrealistic: from the large-scale

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<sup>132</sup> Creekmur and Mokdad, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>133</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Kaganovsky, “Russian Rock,” 259.

<sup>135</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 66.

<sup>136</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 1-3.

<sup>137</sup> Grant, *Hollywood Film Musical*, 47.

chase through the train carriages and the won fight in the Psycho Killer-sequence;<sup>138</sup> to The Passenger-sequence<sup>139</sup> wherein the tram passengers seem completely oblivious to what is happening around them until the precise moment they start singing themselves, only to return to their oblivious state straight after; and the Perfect Day-sequence,<sup>140</sup> wherein a singing lady dressed in white ascending to the heavens with angel-like wings should be enough indication of stepping outside of the diegesis in a film quite as realistic as *Leto* presents itself to be otherwise. Indeed, this is common practice for film musicals: “much singing and dancing that goes on in film musicals lacks both a realistic context and an explicit verbal acknowledgement.”<sup>141</sup> This lack of verbal acknowledgement is not completely true in *Leto*’s case, however: one character does comment on the artificiality of the construct of these scenes, marking them not only as unrealistic but as better than the characters’ ‘real’ world. The American film musical possesses in its essence a merging of the real and the ideal, and it is this contrast that allows the film musical to be an escapist genre, satisfying the viewers’ desire to escape from everyday life as the film’s characters do.<sup>142</sup> Musicals like *Leto* can offer this sort of escapist entertainment because of their ability to present complex and unpleasant feelings in simple, direct, and vivid ways.<sup>143</sup> Having shown that *Leto* is a film musical in this traditional Hollywood definition of the genre, the next chapter will depict what meanings the American, escapist film musical genre inherently carries – and thereby carries over to any viewers of *Leto*.

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<sup>138</sup> *Leto*, 00:21:07-00:26:16.

<sup>139</sup> *Leto*, 00:42:18-00:45:50.

<sup>140</sup> *Leto*, 01:14:22-01:09:13.

<sup>141</sup> Penner, “Rethinking the Diegetic,” 7.

<sup>142</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 74; 272.

<sup>143</sup> Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” 177-182.

### Chapter 4: *Leto's* Musical Utopia

The desire to “look for escapist entertainment in times of collective stress” is not a typically American, but a universal one.<sup>144</sup> Each musical film subgenre (such as the show musical, the fairy tale musical, and the folk musical) meets this utopian need in a different way, as “in each case a different device mediates between the spectator’s reality and the unreal world for which he/she yearns.”<sup>145</sup> While modern film musicals, including *Leto*, rarely belong to any one of these three subgenres anymore, they nonetheless inherently carry these utopian ideas because of their association with the film musical genre. Furthermore, it is not hard to imagine that *Leto's* characters would want an escape from their experiences in the real world. The one thing they are most passionate about, rock music, they are not allowed to interact with, listen to, or make. Even just their own musical endeavours in the Leningrad rock scene have been connected to escapism (as opposed to rock as a counter culture).<sup>146</sup>

#### Imaginary space as utopian space

The film musical’s investment in utopian moments, taking place in ‘noplaces’ or ‘notimes’, is considered the film musical’s distinctive power.<sup>147</sup> Utopias, however, can be various, and opinions on the meaning of the term within a musical context vary. Kenneth MacKinnon has argued that these musical numbers are fantasy (as opposed to the reality of the world as experienced diegetically – outside of the musical numbers),<sup>148</sup> while Heather Laing believes musical numbers to allow for emotional depth of situations and self-expression of characters.<sup>149</sup> Founder of this musicals-as-utopia theory Richard Dyer considers musical scenes to be specifically utopian in the more original sense of the word: “displays of

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, “Soviet Union,” 105.

<sup>145</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 272.

<sup>146</sup> Connell and Gibson, *Sound Tracks*, 120.

<sup>147</sup> Marshall and Stilwell, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>148</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, “‘I Keep Wishing I Were Somewhere Else’: Space and Fantasies of Freedom in the Hollywood Musical,” in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, eds. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 40.

<sup>149</sup> Laing, “Emotion by Numbers,” 9.

abundance, spontaneity, freedom and community.”<sup>150</sup> Dyer sees escapism into utopian worlds as the function of all musical entertainment, but the film musical specifically (re)presents what such a utopia would *feel* like, rather than offer an outline of an actual ideal society.<sup>151</sup> In the case of *Leto*, this interpretation by Dyer is the most applicable. Indeed, *Leto* does not give off the idea that it in any way proposes a specific utopia. It is a conversational topic amongst its characters, however: when Skeptic asks Mayk at a private party where the money in their utopia would come from, he has a simple, yet barely drawn up answer: “common-pot financing.”<sup>152</sup> But furthermore, whenever the characters talk about their desires, they talk not about changing or improvising Russia, but about escaping to the West.<sup>153</sup>

#### The Soviet utopia

Ironically, one could say that it was the musical’s utopian qualities that made musicals extremely popular in the Soviet Union in the 1930s as well.<sup>154</sup> Richard Taylor builds on Richard Dyer’s influential work regarding the relationship between entertainment and utopia, arguing that the Soviet musical, in the way that it embodied the utopian feeling that stimulated audience identification, was “the perfect vehicle for the depiction and promulgation of the Socialist Realist utopia.”<sup>155</sup> The Stalinist musical was the most suited medium in its quest “to convince audiences that, whatever their current hardships, life *could* become as it was depicted on the screen.”<sup>156</sup> “The dance numbers in particular symbolized the importance of

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<sup>150</sup> Richard Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia* (1977), qtd. in Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, “Introduction,” in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 2.

<sup>151</sup> Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” 177-182.

<sup>152</sup> *Leto*, 00:53:00-00:53:37.

<sup>153</sup> *Leto*, 01:41:47-01:43:09.

<sup>154</sup> Anna Lawton, “Introduction: An Interpretive Survey,” in *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art In Soviet Cinema*, ed. Anna Lawton (New York, NY; London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

<sup>155</sup> Taylor, “Soviet Union,” 107.

<sup>156</sup> Taylor, “Stalinist Musical,” 166.

social cohesion and harmony while reaffirming the American dream of unity and social cohesion.<sup>157</sup>

Yet, it is perfectly clear for any viewer that it is not the Socialist Realist utopia that *Leto*'s characters dream about; it is the Socialist Realist reality they wish to escape.

Specifically those aspects mentioned by Kaganovsky borrowed from Hollywood by the Soviet musical, namely unity and social cohesion,<sup>158</sup> are not what Viktor, Mayk and their friends are looking for in life. Their one common, reoccurring desire is freedom. Utopian moments such as represented in *Leto*, could never have been considered in a situation wherein there was complete and total musical freedom in the first place, wherein their utopia was in fact their reality. The characters' utopia was not one shared with socialist realism.

#### The Western utopia

What might the use of a typically American musical model signify in a Russian film on a group of Soviet rock musicians clearly inspired by American music? The use of a film genre that is so typically inspired by and tied to American film tradition, namely the Hollywood film musical, is therein essential to the meaning these musical scenes transfer to the audience. As for a preliminary conclusion, it has become quite clear how *Leto* not only includes Anglo-American music as recurring conversational topic, but as one of its major themes. Additionally, the film references American culture specifically through its traditionally American genre, which moreover includes American music in its musical scenes. Having gained an understanding of the utopian leanings of the Hollywood film musical as a genre and seeing how the genre's basis in American culture is undeniable, also when used in other national cinemas, I make the bridge to arguing how this signifies that *Leto*'s characters long for America as though for an ideal utopia. Director Kirill Serebrennikov stresses the

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<sup>157</sup> Kaganovsky, "Russian Rock," 259.

<sup>158</sup> Kaganovsky, "Russian Rock," 259.

unnaturalness yet desirability of the musical scenes' fantastical realms through the persona of Skeptic.

Each musical sequence is either introduced or closed by Skeptic. Skeptic, or alternatively, the Skeptic, is a vague recurring character in *Leto*. Insiders of the Russian rock scene have suggested that many of the side-characters represent musicians from other bands popular in the Soviet rock scene, such as the rock band Akvarium and punk band Avtomaticheskiye Ydovletvoreniye. On the surface, Skeptic appears to be part of this group of friends surrounding Mayk and Viktor, but upon more careful examination he is barely seen to be interacting with the film's other characters. What I would like to propose on the basis of these realisations, is that Skeptic represents a personification of director Kirill Serebrennikov, who has written himself into the narrative so as to communicate more directly to his audience.

#### Skeptic commentary

This first musical scene comes as quite a surprise to the unsuspecting viewer, who sees Viktor, Mayk and their friends on a train cart. After a quarrel with an elderly stranger on the train, which has America and its music as its topic, the police is called to step in and arrest one of the boys. The musical sequence is introduced by the man we later come to find out is referred to as Skeptic. Addressing the audience directly, he says: "At the request of our listeners, a song by Talking Heads called 'Psycho Killer'."<sup>159</sup> He ends the scene quite abruptly as well. As the camera follows the group of friends on a chase through the train, Skeptic interrupts it by making a stop sign with his hand. He then holds up a warning sign for high voltage power lines, turns it around so it says in Russian in either red paint or blood: "This did not happen." He stops the train by pulling the emergency lever and suddenly, the story is back to the boy being arrested by police, rather than fighting them and running away.

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<sup>159</sup> *Leto*, 00:22:45-00:23:30.

Skeptic arrives at the second musical scenes only after it has finished. He enters on a bicycle, quoting lyrics from Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger'. "By the American Iggy Pop, you heard the song 'The Passenger'. Unfortunately, this did not happen. It would have been nice if it did, though." As he continues looking at the camera, he rides off. His previous introduction, and this endnote, are reminiscent of the part of a (radio) presenter. After the third musical sequence, he tells the viewer a little story about Lou Reed: "A perfect day, according to Lou Reed, is drinking in the park, feeding animals in the zoo, and a movie, too, and then home. It's a perfect day." Mayk's day, however, was far from that, and so Skeptic's smirk is almost ironic. Only the day described in the song is perfect; the utopia presented is perfect; their reality is far from it.

We know, from the characters' conversations, that they long for the West. Especially Mayk looks toward Western artists with admiration, when he compares his own music to theirs: "What's new about my music to the Americans? After The Beatles, The Stones, The Doors, Led Zeppelin, The Clash, Joy Division, Bowie, Bolan, Dylan, T. Rex and even Blondie?"<sup>160</sup> But the Skeptic seems to say what is on Mayk's doubting mind as well: "Hello, Lou Reed. Hello, Dylan. Dylan sings about Vietnam and a falsely accused black boxer. What do you sing about, Mayk? This is a song about a content, complacent bastard who doesn't give a shit about how fucked up his country is."<sup>161</sup> The escapist utopian status of the musical scenes is thus strengthened by the reoccurring role of the Skeptic as well as confirmed through the characters' wishes as spoken out loud. Skeptic's observations highlight the artificiality of the format of the film musical and bring attention to how the musical scenes come to represent an American utopia of musical freedom of expression, in stark contrast with the Russia here often referred to as a swamp.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> *Leto*, 01:42:50-01:43:09.

<sup>161</sup> *Leto*, 00:29:30-00:29:50.

<sup>162</sup> *Leto*, 00:26:22-00:26:30; *Leto*, 01:41:47-01:41:55.

By constantly having Skeptic remind the audience of the fact that they are watching a film musical through the emphasis placed on the artificiality of the musical scenes, the fact that these are indeed outside of the film's diegesis, Kirill Serebrennikov places a certain importance on the film's genre as playing a part in the meaning-making of the film that is in every aspect about music. While Viktor, Mayk, Natasha and their friends talk about the West, the musical scenes featuring American music placed outside the diegesis reveal their desire for a certain freedom afforded by the West; all the while Serebrennikov reminds his audience of the specifically American film genre he chose for his film *Leto*.

## Conclusion

While the film musical has seen local variations all over the world, all eyes – and written pieces – remain on the founding flavour of the genre: the Hollywood film musical. When scholars do talk about Russian musical films, the topic of their writing is rarely more recent than Stalinist musicals. Moreover, as Richard Taylor among others has addressed, there had been little writing comparing the film musicals of Russia and the West.<sup>163</sup> Contemporary Russian film musicals should, however, be considered fascinating subjects of research, especially since they are inseparably intertwined with their American origin as well as specifically national in their application of this model.

Especially interesting is how a film's genre is absolutely essential in how a film generates meaning,<sup>164</sup> even if it does so inconspicuously. One such film is *Leto* (2018), which is especially interesting as the film's topic is musical: Russian rock musicians, heavily influenced by Anglo-American trends in music. From a Soviet viewpoint, the West was both “an imagined and imaginary world, as a cultural, political, and economic imaginary, which the Russian collective mind situates beyond the Iron Curtain,”<sup>165</sup> or so Yana Hashamova suggests in her *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (2007). Hashamova looks at how the image of the other, specifically the West, is constructed in recent Russian films.<sup>166</sup> She is not the only other to have focused on Russian identity (and its relation to the West) in recent years: Anna Lawton's reference book *Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts* (2004) paints a portrait of a Russia in search of its true identity post-Soviet,<sup>167</sup> Stephen Hutchings published an exploration of Soviet cinematic representations of otherness in

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<sup>163</sup> Taylor, “Stalinist Musical,” 178.

<sup>164</sup> Altman, *American Musical*, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Hashamova, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>166</sup> Yana Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

<sup>167</sup> Anna Lawton, *Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2004).

2008,<sup>168</sup> and Irina Souch's close readings of contemporary Russian films show the importance placed on depicting Russian cultural identity even in 2019.<sup>169</sup> We can conclude that identity, specifically Russian and American identities, continues to be a reoccurring theme in Russian film. My analysis of the film musical *Leto* as expressing a longing for a Western utopia has shown how contemporary Russian films can be valuable sources for information on Russian identity. While previous publications have opened up ways to talk about Russia's identity search, they seem to overlook the hereby proven importance of contemporary film musicals as sources of information on the subject.

As a result of Russia's long isolation throughout the twentieth century, English-language academia has had very little to say on the music and films that developed in Russia during that time. By looking at contemporary accounts of this Soviet history in arts, such as Kirill Serebrennikov's *Leto*, we may begin to understand little by little the culture that was closed off from our view for so long, yet so intertwined with our Western culture. Since post-Soviet Russian film musicals are so often left out of academia, there is a variety of films left to learn from: films that either employ American film genres, that play with Russian versus American identity, and/or employ Western music in their storytelling. It is a shame that we so often study national cinemas in confinement only, especially as these industries simply do not exist in isolation.

This thesis exploring the recent Russian film musical *Leto* has made a step into this intercultural direction by providing an understanding of how the typically American film genre, carefully complemented with pre-existing American music for its escapist musical scenes, gives meaning to *Leto* outside of its diegesis. The effect of this combination of typically American genre plus American music in a Russian context, is that the musical

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<sup>168</sup> Stephen C. Hutchings, ed., *Russia and its Other(s) on Film: Screening Intercultural Dialogue* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>169</sup> Irina Souch, *Popular Tropes of Identity in Contemporary Russian Television and Film* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019).

scenes come to represent a Western freedom that the film's characters view as utopian: the ideal society, outside their reach.

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### **Filmography**

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