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Singing for Meaning

A Search for Cultural Identity in Contemporary Musical Films from Russia

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The revival of the Russian film industry after the collapse of the state-run Soviet one was followed by a gradual and extensive assimilation of popular Hollywood genres. Both film producers and state functionaries saw importing commercially viable foreign forms, and wrapping local content into them, as a formula for bringing audiences back into cinemas, while at the same time cultivating a taste for domestic film products.[1] Starting from the late 1990s, many popular genres have been re-invented, if with mixed success. To no small degree, that has entailed employing foreign approaches to production modes, visual styles, and narrative patterns, and imbuing them with local content.

Unsurprisingly, taking something foreign and situating it within the national context inevitably sparks a certain tension and highlights questions of cultural affiliation and identity of both film product and film viewer. The film musical has proved to be no exception here. It is known that, due to the genre's inherently loose verisimilitude and its proclivity for defamiliarization, musicals possess a particular capacity for reflection on abstract issues. Meanwhile, with such a strong cultural marker as music playing a central role in the genre, national musicals are distinctive manifestations of cultural identity. While contemplating this issue around different domains – globalization, trauma, nostalgia, the postmodern condition, etc. – contemporary Russian film musicals represent a platform for negotiation between old and new, foreign and local, original and imitation as points of tension within Russian society in the twenty-first century.

Stilyagi,[2] released in late 2008, became the first big-screen musical within the new Russian film industry. It is worth mentioning that the film producers tended to characterize it as a "musical comedy" rather than a musical, highlighting in such a manner the film's alleged link to Soviet production conventions.[3] Yet, *Stilyagi*'s formula seems to comprise borrowing from the Hollywood genre legacy and adapting it to the local historical and cultural

context just as much as continuing the national cinematic traditions. Along with allusions to Soviet films, *Stilyagi*, on both narrative and stylistic levels, dredges up images from such diverse Western musical films as Miloš Forman's *Hair* (1979), Alan Parker's *Pink-Floyd – The Wall* (1982), Herbert Ross' *Footloose* (1984) and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), among other films.[4] Thus, Valery Todorovsky's picture was the first one to open up a discussion on cultural identity within the genre.

The story, set in mid-1950s Moscow, depicts the post-war youth subculture "*stilyagi*" ("the stylish ones"). The *stilyagi* admired Western music and bright attire, opposed the dull Soviet lifestyle, and were consequently marginalized and prosecuted by authorities. *Stilyagi* do not pursue accuracies in historical details while representing both the depicted period and the movement in a half-fantasized, stereotypical, and even grotesque way.[5] Rather than building on chronicles or memorials, the 2008 film therefore refers to Soviet visuals (e.g. caricature posters) and Hollywood genre conventions (a conformist boy falls in love with a non-conformist girl, commits "a rite of passage" and enjoys the taste of freedom of expression). Nonetheless, it succeeds in accurately channeling the spirit of Soviet post-war enthusiasm and hopes for liberal changes, marked as they were by a hint of hardship and oppression.

The film's completely ahistorical aspect is music. Instead of deploying Western jazz of the mid-20th-century that the real "stilyagi" used to listen to, the film scores jazzed-up versions of Russian rock songs of the 1980-90s with lyrics adapted to the film plot.[6] As the film producers explained, one does not make a mainstream musical for a broad audience and base it entirely on old foreign music.[7] Simultaneously, they justified the aptness and relevance of the bands Chaif, Zoopark, Kino and Bravo and their songs within the context of *Stilyagi*. According to the film's producers, this music written during *perestroika* and *glasnost* times is intertwined in mass consciousness with the formal theme of the film, which is social protest and non-conformity. Moreover, the fact that those bands represent a generation born to that of the *stilyagi* is suggestive of historical continuity, which encourages parallels between the depicted events and modern times. However, the striking peculiarity is that those featured rock songs, which have imbued the cultural code of contemporary Russians, themselves represent a localized version of Western music. Not unlike how the whole film *Stilyagi* represents a localized version of the Hollywood genre pattern, the musical score reflects notions of cultural negotiation and the controversial understanding of "Russianness" today.

Most explicitly, this question is raised in the film's finale. Fred, one of the gang's former leaders who has just returned from a diplomatic trip to the USA, reveals an unpleasant truth to protagonist Mels: "there are no *stilyagi there*." While positioning itself as a form of sincere self-expression counter to the dominant Soviet culture's simulacrum, *stilyagi* still relied on their imagined Western referents. However, similarly to the film's loose representation of the

Soviet 1950s that has no strong reference to historical reality, the *stilyagi* movement also loses its referent on the narrative level. But after recovering from the shock, Mels positively utters: “but we do exist!”. The loss of perceived historical referent is not seen as a loss of authenticity. “This wonderful, wicked and funny epoch did not grind us into dust”, the lyrics of Chaif’s song *Shaliay-Valiay* resound from Mels’ lips (in a slightly altered fashion). While Mels suddenly finds himself not in the 1950s but in the 2000s on Tverskaya street among shop-signs and outdoor advertising, his words unambiguously refer to the modern generation of Russians who survived a turmoil of sudden globalization in the 1990-2000s.

In this final scene, *Stilyagi* reconciles its viewers with the idea of a fluid and inevitably changing cultural identity – negotiated afresh with every new rupture and every new contact with foreignness. In the words of Stuart Hall,[8] the authentic character of cultural identity at any moment of history is not hinged on some fixed essence as a stable referent. According to him, cultural identity in our postmodern era is instead something multilayered – an entity constituted of multiple and diverse influences superimposed one over another. An allegory to this notion might be seen in the film’s speechless prologue. The sequence depicts a handicraft production of a “vinyl” disc out of an X-ray photograph onto which music is subsequently recorded. In Soviet times, this used to be an unauthorized but common practice of forbidden music distribution. So, this recording of a layer of Western music upon a layer of Soviet “bones”[9] is nothing but another illustration of the inevitability of intercultural influences in a globalized world.[10] The old Moscow streets turn out to be saturated with international commercial banners, while all those punks, Rastafarians, and even ordinary teenagers of today who surround Mels in the film’s finale, have a westernized look. However, the film affirms the idea that cultural authenticity is never lost in this process – neither for Russian-language music nor for contemporary Russian genre cinema; neither for the diegetic *stilyagi* of the 1950s nor for the millions of Russians at the beginning of the 21st century. Instead, it gets drawn from various sources and is destined to experience further transformations.

Leto, released almost ten years later, in 2018, is in many ways a successor to *Stilyagi.* Notably, Kirill Serebrennikov’s film features quite similar musical content – rock songs from the 1980s. However, it contextualizes these songs in their production period, focusing the story on the (a)historical encounter between late-Soviet rock-stars Mike Naumenko of Zoopark and young Viktor Tsoi of Kino. *Leto* presents a fantasized vision of the depicted period, juxtaposing quasi-documentary black-and-white shots with completely imaginary sequences; mixing memories, fantasies, facts, and mythologies, so that the question of what really happened that summer in Leningrad remains unanswered. Such a representation of the epoch is attained, in many respects, through the interfusion of a realistic *backstage musical* formula with escapist “impossible” numbers,[11] sometimes without a clear distinction between them.

Simultaneously, while some scenes allude to Soviet countercultural musical films from the *perestroika* era,[12] the inspiration *Leto* gained from contemporary Western musical biopics, such as Winterbottom's *24-Hours Party People* (2002) and Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007), is quite salient.

With that, *Leto* highlights the problem of the origins of Russian rock music. The counter-cultural Leningrad youth is depicted as strongly influenced by Western music trends, despite the authorities' helpless attempts to contain them. Western culture permeates the Iron Curtain, though it is still intangible and cannot be exhibited freely. When Punk, one of the characters in the film, dares to sing a Sex Pistols song on a train, he gets harassed by a drunkard for not being patriotic enough and is eventually taken in by some plainclothes agents. The English-language soundtrack imbues the character's fantasies but does not freely cross over into reality. Even in the mentioned scene, the *diegetic* English-singing remained, by and large, off-screen. Meanwhile, the numbers in which the heroes suddenly start singing Talking Heads' *Psycho Killer* or Iggy Pop's *Passenger* are explicitly marked as "impossible" – superimposed with unrealistic pencil drawings and a title stating that this is not what really happened, thereby breaking the fourth wall.

Mike (played by contemporary Russian rock-star Roman Bilyk) – an already established figure in the Leningrad Rock-Club – acts as an agent between the real diegetic "here" and the fantasized "there." His music is multilayered, a "palimpsest" based on American and British rock musicians' legacy whose lyrics and melodies Mike re-works and adapts to the Russian cultural context. This is well-illustrated in the aftershow scene shot in amateur 8mm-video style. Marc Bolan's *Broken Heart Blues* is playing in the background. The original lyrics appear on the lefthand side of the frame, while Mike's "Russian" version appears on the righthand side. With that, his aspiration to be a Russian version of Bolan or Lou Reed implies a partial effacing of his own self, which is replaced with a "mask." As an illustration, Mike refuses to take his sunglasses off in one of the scenes despite being indoors, signifying his need to always stay "in character." Moreover, Mike aspires to be a rock-star in an environment that does not seem to entail such a phenomenon in a Western sense at all. So, playing a role inorganic for the society of his days makes him live on the borderline between reality and fantasy. Emblematically, Mike's performance of his song "Rock-n-Roll Star" on the Rock-Club stage turns into a rock-debauch with stagediving, guitar smashing, and hysterical fans – unbelievable events in Soviet times. But by the end, the character of the Skeptic addresses the camera by negating the depicted events as false, just as he had done before during English-language numbers.

On the other hand, Viktor Tsoi (Teo Yoo) is represented as an unmediated authentic author. His refusal to concede to officials that his songs are "trifles", or that they bear indirect Marxist criticism of society's flaws – even to merely get approval for performances – accentuates his sincere self-expression. Tsoi's

simple acoustic songs “My Friends”, “Idler”, “Tree” always sound like they’re emanating from the “here and now”, that is from within the film’s diegetic reality. At Mike’s behest, Viktor reluctantly agrees to enrich his songs with “imported” features but eventually concludes that he doesn’t like the way the recorded album sounds.

This fascinating authenticity is what initially attracts Mike (as well as his wife Natalia) to Viktor. At the same time, it eventually leads to Mike’s identity crisis, which helps articulate the film’s attitude towards Russian cultural affiliation. When Mike expresses doubts about whether any new Russian music with export potential exists, one of his buddies exclaims: “You exist!”. This line evokes Mels’ affirmation of authentic existence at the end of *Stilyagi*. However, contrary to Mels’ hopeful enthusiasm, Mike’s awakening is aligned with his realization that there is nothing essentially original either about his art or about himself that could appeal to an experienced international audience. Mike represents a kind of author of postmodernist cultural logic, which, in Lev Manovich’s words, no longer tries “to make it new,” but is rather “endlessly recycling and quoting the past media content, artistic styles and forms”.[13] Mike suddenly finds himself mired in a postmodern “carnivalesque” ethos of a purposeless play of identities, while his original self has actually long been dissolved. In the “All the Young Dudes” sequence, he peers into the Western album covers hung on the wall. He literally sees himself and his friends in the place of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones – the identities he aspired to appropriate. Melancholically tracing nothing but his own masquerade, he silently yearns for the author’s authenticity and sincere self-expression.

In this context, *Leto* echoes *Stilyagi’*s notion of the vanishing referent, but ultimately articulates it as postmodern discontent associated with cultural disorientation and an inevitable obsession with nostalgia for lost authenticity. In trying to cope with this situation, *Leto* sorts out the cultural legacy of recent decades – Russian rock-songs that came up as a result of imitating the Western analogs, and those which represent local authenticity (in this case, the songs of Zoopark and Kino respectively). In this vein, the film also reiterates the age-old critics of Russia as a culture rooted in mimicking the West. As expressed once by Pyotr Chaadayev in his *Philosophical Letters*,[14] if Russia is unable to make its own unique contribution to human culture, it will be doomed to a historical dead-end. Written in the 19th century, Chaadayev’s text produced an on-going polemic between those who saw Russia as part of either the cultural West, the East, or something in between. The film continues this discourse of a need for cultural identification, while Viktor’s explicitly “Asiatic” look might signify the longing for Russian authenticity as being associated with the East no less than with the West.

With less reflection on the complex character of its cultural roots, but primarily as a common cultural denominator, rock and pop music of the recent past is also employed in *Ice*, also released in 2018 and directed by Oleg Trofim. Partly

financed by the State Cinema Fund and state-owned TV channels, the film combines the genres of sports (melo)drama and romantic musical. While the former is rapidly emerging as one of the cornerstone genres of Russian patriotic cinema, the musical proves its capability here to enforce the audience's sense of collective unity. So, just like imported genre conventions are exploited here for local patriotic encouragement, the musical material from the late-1990s to the early 2000s is assumed to be a completely "national" asset and a source of collective cultural identity.

Unlike *Leto*, where musical numbers are integrated into the narrative as either live-performances or entirely imagined scenes, the musical's strategy in *Ice* somewhat resembles that of *Stilyagi*, where the character's performances augment the diegetic reality and emotionally comment on it. However, while in *Stilyagi*, singing and dancing are thematically pretty much part of the story, *Ice*, in its turn, tries to keep it even more "natural", abstaining from excessive choreography, though still preserving the musical genre's inherently utopian sensibility. With that, the film similarly embraces the same "jukebox" (or "karaoke", as frequently referred to in Russia) strategy. The score indiscriminately puts Viktor Tsoi's late post-punk on a par with Bogdan Titomir's early-1990s' rap, and Zemfira's poetic rock-ballad with pop-songs from the early MTV-Russia era. Thus, *Ice* defies the traditional Russian dichotomy between independent, politically-conscious rock, on the one hand, and commercial, conformist pop music on the other, lumping them all together under one unifying nostalgic umbrella.

Ice follows the life-story of provincial girl Nadya (short for Nadezhda, which means hope in Russian) who lives near the Baikal lake, and, despite all obstacles, succeeds in becoming a prominent figure skater. The plot revolves around a few main points: a trauma that Nadya (Aglaya Tarasova) suffers during a top performance, her recovery process, and her comeback to the rink with the help of hockey-player Sasha (Alexander Petrov). The film culminates at another competition when Nadya falls again, her professional partner retreats, but then Sasha shows up and replaces her partner on the ice. When the international judges refuse to put the music on, considering this to be against the rules, the stadium audience spontaneously starts singing, backing up Nadya's and Sasha's performance.

In compliance with the idea that musicals tend to offer "the image of 'something better' to escape into… that our day-to-day lives don't provide," *Ice* encourages its viewer to imagine "what utopia would feel like."[15] To that end, the film metaphorically evokes the narrative of Russian identity rooted in ruptures and traumas while at the same time affirming national pride. *Ice* quite blatantly addresses Russian viewers' patriotic feelings, foregrounding the idea of inner grandeur, which, as the film assumes, lies at the core of the national identity despite historical hardships. Daily life in Russian provinces is shown as dull and bleak, with only a typical Soviet Palace of Sports building to remind

people of past highpoints and one's glorious cultural legacy. Another recurring image of greatness is the vast Baikal lake. The essence of national spirit is assumed to be linked not to the old-fashioned apartments' humbleness, but to Siberian Nature's splendor. The icy surface of the Baikal reiterates the film's central motif of fractures. The cracks on ice are juxtaposed with Nadya's broken bones, which are in turn metaphorically associated with Russia's historical disruptions, carried from the last century to the new one. However, not unlike *Stilyagi*, *Ice* does not see those disruptions as something necessarily destructive. As characters repeatedly mention throughout the film, the lake "talks" to people walking on it "through its cracks," thus implying the idea of necessary ruptures in both nature's communication with Russians, and in Russians' historical path as a nation.

Similarly, the spine fracture turns out to be just another challenge for the heroine to overcome along her path to glory. The imminence and suggested necessity of traumatic experiences is justified in one of the film's graphic numbers – 5'Nizza's reggae song "Soldier" that is performed by boarding-school girls. In the given context, the song's otherwise clear antiwar implication is inverted – one ought to be disciplined and enduring like a soldier and ready to overcome pain in order to achieve anything. The film addresses the viewer's patriotic feelings the state's official propaganda frequently speculates on. In short, the ideological message is: the historical fractures only toughen up the national spirit for future achievements that will be attained, not necessarily in compliance with formally written rules. On the one hand, this point is presented as something allegedly incomprehensible to the international community, as the sports jury threatens to sanction the Russian team at the film's end. On the other, it is assumed to be intuitively clear to the mass viewers at the stadium (who are paralleled with cinema viewers) who support the heroes with the uplifting chant from A-Mega's "Fly": "To fly across the world… Leaving behind all you feel sorry for". The utopian musical finale not only connotes reconciliation with imperfections of the past and present while pointing to future ambitions. Most importantly, the audience's implied collective and simultaneous recollection of this half-forgotten song suggests the manifestation and affirmation of a shared cultural code.

Avoiding fully original scores in favor of existing musical material is the common feature of most contemporary Russian film musicals, including, as well as the abovementioned examples, such commercial mainstream products like *The Very Best Day* (2015) and *Ice*'s sequel (2020), both directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov. Along with securing the viewers' response to familiar songs, this Hollywood-imported "karaoke-style" has sparked criticism for not always being "organic." Needless to say, the Soviet genre tradition, since its emergence in the 1930s, worked with originally written music and song lyrics.[16] The only recent big-screen musical relying on ad hoc composed music is Sergey Loban's indie-epic *Chapiteau-Show* that was released in two parts (in 2011 and 2012, respectively). Loban's distinctive focus on the original score by The Karamazov

Twins contributes to the film's critical concern for sincerity, authenticity, and cultural integrity in a globalized postmodern world. With that said, the film does not hold off from using borrowed genre features as well.

Chapiteau-Show is divided into four short stories of different people pursuing their own goals: the film features a couple who have met on the Internet and decide to go on a vacation together; a father and son who try to organize a reunion after years of separation; a gentle-hearted deaf guy in search of friends; and a sly producer willing to resuscitate a stage persona of late Viktor Tsoi through his accidentally found double. Acting independently from each other, all the aspiring characters come to the Crimean seashore, which turns into a utopian destination where characters' hopes are expected to spring to life. However, the place turns out to be nothing but a cheap resort for tourists, while the heroes only find themselves self-absorbed, estranged, disoriented, and incapable of communicating with each other.

The dominating image is that of the Chapiteau – a temporary pavilion erected on the seashore. Under its tent, Western pop-culture idols share the stage with Soviet icons, merging into low-taste kitschy entertainment. The cheap show is associated with late-capitalist culture that absorbed the post-Soviet landscape, where everything has long lost its meaning so people only theatrically worship hollow signs. The pseudo-pioneer squad of hedonistic hipsters on their vacation might imitate the outfit and insignia from Soviet times, but in their chanting, they recite neither Marx nor Lenin, merely recounting the names of deceased iconic singers, Western and Soviet alike. Some of those impersonated icons appear on the Chapiteau's stage but prove to be mere farcical and reusable images exploited by intensely commercialized pop-culture. This futility of the postmodern culture of simulacra is foregrounded in the plotline about the fake Tsoi. Whereas the 1980s Tsoi in *Leto* stood for sincerity and authenticity, his double in the 2010s is nothing but an extreme cultural antipode. He might look, move, and sing like Tsoi. His newly written songs might sound identical and feature similar poetics. However, there is nothing meaningful about his appearance – the culture of pastiche and nostalgia is stuck at a dead-end, so the opportunistic producer's whole project is doomed to fail.

Notably, fake-Tsoi's performance is the only one integrated into the diegetic plotline. In a manner similar to the one used in Foss' *Cabaret* (1972) and Marshall's *Chicago* (2002), all other characters perform their numbers from the stage of the Chapiteau, independently from the main narrative lines and without moving them forward. Ironically, Chapiteau turns into the only place where the heroes can express their real thoughts and feelings as the physical diegetic world appears to be an inappropriate place for sincere self-expression. "There is no one to say 'We' to" / "We are mere digits on the Internet" / "Both patriots and cosmopolites are counting bills" – in their songs, the characters describe the worldly state of affairs as a hypocritical, materialistic, and cynical state of existence where nothing is authentic. In contrast to this, the songs'

lyrics are deliberately simplistic and accompanied by a minimalistic synthesizer. Characterized by markedly unprofessional performances and clumsy stage movements, the numbers evoke associations with a children's matinée, thus channeling the film's sensibility of a longing for lost naivety. Simultaneously, the foregrounded artificiality of the numbers from the narrative perspective and their incongruity with the film's diegetic reality, bring home its subversive meta-message. The very fact that in order to be sincere, one must take part in a Show and play a masquerade [genre] game, seems like a verdict on modern culture. Ultimately, Chapiteau is merely a vulgar form of commercial entertainment, so, according to the film's logic, the culture of "chapiteaux" deserves nothing but to be burned down – which literally happens by the end of each story.

Musicals remain relatively rare within the Russian film industry. This might reflect Russian viewers' complicated relations with the genre, which is sometimes considered foreign and unnatural when incorporated into the local context. The prevalence of "jukebox" or "karaoke" musicals over "original" ones seems like an accommodating strategy (though it is also Hollywood-borrowed): genre conventions might be new and imported, but the musical content stays local and familiar. The same job is done by some recurring features like that of Viktor Tsoi's symbolic presence in almost all of the abovementioned films as a shared cultural figure that is required for facilitating the viewer's reception of the genre. Speaking of which, even the analyzed films, despite their direct affiliation with the genre, were not marketed as "musicals." This was also the situation in Soviet times, when, despite a proliferation of musical comedies, the label "musical" was avoided due to its associations with "bourgeois culture." Today, the word similarly dredges up the image of foreign cultural influence, which might deter a more conservative part of the Russian audience. So, making a film musical without calling it by its name becomes another compromise in this cultural negotiation.

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4. Beyond that, in his review Mark Feeney of The Boston Globe fairly mentions parallels with such American films as West Side Story (Wise/Robbins, 1961), American Graffiti (Lucas, 1973), and Swing Kids (Carter, 1993). See, Feeney, M. (2012). Hipsters. The Boston Globe.

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6. The degrees of discrepancy with original tunes and lyrics range from taken completely intact (Nol's "A Man and A Cat'') to completely modified into rap (Nautilus Pompilius' "Chained by One Chain'').
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9. The film's working title was "Boogie on Bones''.
10. The same idea is epitomized on the narrative level with the introduction of a black child – a secret son of Mels' girlfriend Polza from a random American student who briefly visited Moscow. The child, albeit born as a result of a Western "intrusion'', is not considered a stranger – Mels' father recognizes him as "ours,'' while Polza's mother claims that the baby has "our'' eyes. The child is also one of the film's allusions to the Soviet musical Circus (Alexandrov/Simkov, 1936). Among other things, these allusions and citations to Soviet films serve to counterbalance "Stilyagi'''s Hollywood roots in the eyes of the viewer.
11. According to Martin Rubin, "a significant proportion'' of such "impossible'' numbers – i.e. those that are "impossible from the standpoint of the realistic discourse of the narrative'' – is what defines a film musical as such. See Rubin, M. (1993). Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle, New York: Columbia University Press.
12. Such as Rashid Nugmanov's Yya-Khkha (1986) and Needle (1988), or Sergey Solovyov's ASSA (1988).
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