

# “Unfortunately, none of this happened”: Kirill Serebrennikov’s *Leto* (Summer), a take on the pre- perestroika period in the USSR

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*Directed by Kirill Serebrennikov; written by Serebrennikov, Mikhail Idov, Lili Idova and Ivan Kapitonov*

Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov’s new film *Leto* (*Summer*), about the early years of two pre- *perestroika*-era rock groups, Kino and Zoopark, which screened at the Cannes film festival in 2018, has now opened in the US.

The film was made under conditions of considerable financial and political duress. In August 2017, before shooting was completed, Serebrennikov was detained and placed under house arrest. The Russian authorities charge him, in an apparently politically motivated case, with misappropriating government funds allocated to a theater festival. *Leto*’s filming was completed in the summer of 2017 in St. Petersburg without Serebrennikov being able to direct in person. He was released from house arrest in April 2019 after some 20 months.

*Leto* is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), then the center of Soviet youth subculture and underground rock. The protagonists of the film are Viktor Tsoi (Teo Yoo), who later headed the now legendary Soviet rock group Kino; Mikhail (Mike) Naumenko (Roman Bilyk), the lead singer and song writer of Zoopark; and the latter’s wife, Natalia (Irina Starshenbaum).

It is difficult to think of a more popular cultural figure in recent decades in Russia than Tsoi, who tragically died in a car crash at the age of only 28, in 1990. Songs by Kino such as “Peremen” (“Change”) and “Muraveinik” (“Ant hill”) became hymns of *perestroika*. (Tsoi’s mother was a Russian schoolteacher and his father a Soviet-Korean engineer.)

Even today, many people know Kino’s songs by heart, and there has been no comparable phenomenon in Russian music since 1991. In many Russian cities, one can still find graffiti reading *Tsoi zhiv!* (“Tsoi lives!”). Monuments have been erected in his honor, and a stamp was introduced with his face in the 1990s.

Lines such as “We await change” from *Peremen* and “I

don’t like to be lied to but am also tired of the truth” from *Muraveinik*—written at the height of *glasnost*, when people were literally swamped with historical revelations about Soviet history, mixed with a flood of openly right-wing anti-Communist literature—expressed the thoughts and feelings of millions, especially of young people.

One senses in Tsoi’s texts not only the dissatisfaction and individual rebellion against the status quo, but also the disorientation and demoralization of an entire generation. Most of the songs, as opposed to Western-style rock ‘n’ roll which, of course, had a big influence on Tsoi, appear melancholic, at times even depressed, rather than rebellious, angry or joyful.

From this standpoint, to depict Tsoi’s early years and the people and milieu that shaped him would appear to be both an artistically intriguing and challenging task. Unfortunately, Serebrennikov does not seem seriously interested in taking that on.

*Leto* is half biographical film and half simply made up, with the line between the two often being unclear to the viewer. The focus is on the personal lives and friendship of Tsoi and Naumenko, and the quickly emerging love triangle including them and Naumenko’s wife, Natalia. All the protagonists, and particularly these three, come across as sensitive, honest and sympathetic people who, while vaguely oppositional toward the Soviet system, nevertheless appear deeply integrated into it and far from desiring its overthrow.

We learn about the role of Naumenko, who was already an established musician and several years older than Tsoi, in facilitating the latter’s establishment as a musician. He offers Tsoi some advice on improving his song-writing and helps Tsoi get his first gig at the Leningrad Rock Club (which opened in 1981). The latter is run by party bureaucrats who make sure no audience member sings along, stands up, dances or shows any other sign of active engagement with and enthusiasm for the music. According to Russian film analysts, some details in the film are

historically inaccurate.

Throughout *Leto*, the lines between reality and fantasy are systematically blurred. The narrative of the film is interrupted several times by sequences that seem to stem from the imagination of the director (and, we are led to believe, of at least some of the movie's characters), and at the end of which a young man addresses the camera, saying: "Unfortunately, none of this happened."

Unhappily, this statement also applies to much of the film itself.

Many of Tsoi's early songs that feature prominently in this film—"Moi друзia" ("My Friends") and "Bezdel'nik" ("Lazybones")—don't do much more than convey the desire to drink, hang out with friends and live however one wants to live, regardless of prevailing Soviet mores and notions. These songs apparently formed the background to Serebrennikov's approach to the film. He depicts essentially the world that Tsoi and Naumenko immediately described or wished for in their songs, without making any attempt to go beyond *their* imagination and *their* perception of Soviet society and life almost 40 years ago.

In his depiction of Soviet life, Serebrennikov does not offer much more than nostalgic clichés: the closed-in, conventional but cheerful life in the *kommunalki* (communal apartments), with elderly ladies yelling loudly at the young people, but always ready to take care of their children; middle-aged men on public transportation who are outraged by the clothing and life style associated with Soviet rock and who angrily demand the younger generation play a useful part in society; stiff party bureaucrats who seem laughable, but are also, ultimately, somewhat likable and humane; etc.

Serebrennikov's *Leto* provides no sense of the political crisis beginning to emerge in the USSR; no sense of the danger of nuclear war that, after all, was very real in the 1980s; no sense of the extreme deprivation facing broad layers of the working class; no sense of why millions of workers would just a few years later rebel against the Soviet bureaucracy; no sense, ultimately, of what drove Tsoi and Naumenko and so many of their generation to protest against the bureaucracy, a protest that, in Tsoi's music, largely took the form of a general profession of disgust, fatigue and retreat from politics into individualism.

In the end, while amusing for some time, the film amounts to little else but a romanticized depiction of the late Soviet period and the layer of the artistic intelligentsia out of which Kino emerged, a layer and generation with whom Serebrennikov himself no doubt identifies.

*Leto* thus points to just how little the historical, political and cultural questions raised by the *perestroika* period and the dissolution of the USSR have been consciously worked through by Russia's artists.

Serebrennikov himself is in some sense a child of *perestroika*. Though a few years younger than Tsoi and Naumenko (he was born in 1970), like the latter Serebrennikov is part of a generation of intellectuals that had been completely cut off from the legacy of the Russian Revolution and grew up with little concrete idea of the program of the revolution, the significance of the struggle of the Left Opposition in the 1920s and the extent of the murderous Stalinist reaction against the revolutionaries of 1917 during the 1930s. Their dissatisfaction with the status quo in 1980s was as strong as it was disoriented and politically helpless, making it easy for the Stalinist bureaucracy to manipulate and mobilize these layers in its drive toward capitalist restoration.

In the years that followed, the major *perestroika* artists and intellectuals generally moved sharply to the right, with many supporting reactionary politicians like Boris Yeltsin, some becoming outright supporters of fascist, neo-Stalinist formations such as the National Bolsheviks, and others backing Vladimir Putin's Russian nationalism. While Naumenko and Tsoi both died young, in 1990 and 1991, respectively, there is, unfortunately, little reason to believe they would not have followed a similar trajectory. This makes Serebrennikov's celebration of their somewhat charming but politically feeble and naïve ideas both unsatisfying and troubling.

Although no doubt a deeply sensitive and talented artist, Serebrennikov, unfortunately, has not been able to move even one inch beyond the ideas and worldview of the liberal intelligentsia whose opposition to the Putin regime he supports.

Echoing the liberals' contempt for the Russian population at large, he noted in a 2014 interview that Russia was a "country where slavery had never been removed" and whose people did not cherish freedom. He denounced Putin's supporters as frightened people who did not wish to know or decide anything for themselves. In 2015, in a similar vein, he said the country was living "in a television reality and blindly believes this reality."

Serebrennikov's careless approach to history and indifference to the social devastation facing tens of millions testify to a deep cleavage between layers of the intelligentsia and the experiences and lives of the working class, a cleavage that has been a key impediment to the development of serious and moving artistic works in post-1991 Russia.



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