

## Leto/ 'Summer' (2018)

Biography, Romance, 126 min.

Directed by KIRIL SEREBRENNIKOV

Written by MIKHAIL IDOV, LILI IDOVA, IVAN KAPITONOV, NATALYA

NAUMENKO, KIRIL SEREBRENNIKOV

Cast: Teo Yoo, Irina Starshenbaum, Roman Bilyk

Russia, France: Hype Film, KinoVista, Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC)

Language: Russian, English

When *Leto* premiered in Cannes earlier this year as part of the Official Competition, its director Kiril Serebrennikov was under house arrest in Moscow. Controversy over art as a transnational phenomenon was hushed under grand allegations of theft and, on an existential level, inauthenticity. This came as no surprise since biopics are often subjected to ruthless criticism over a preconceived notion of faithfulness to times past. *Leto* is both a tribute to a traumatic past, and a memoir-based film, which brings it closer to an account of personal history, rather than a re-telling of a national one.

The memory is inextricably bound to national context, yet public and private are woven into *Leto*'s textures as the sharp black and white digital tones are both indebted to the past and transcend its dominance. In a way, Serebrennikov's new film is an entity between past and present, incorporating both nostalgia and critical stance, analogously to the third space of USSR rock stage, which was neither entirely Eastern nor Western. The story is of young underground cult figure Viktor Tsoi (Teo Yoo), who forms a love triangle with his rock veteran mentor Mayk Naumenko (Roman Bilyk) and his captivating wife Natalya (Irina Starshenbaum). Leningrad in the 80s has its utopian island, known as Leningrad Rock Club - a state-controlled haven for rock concerts. Apart from the topology of the film, *Leto* encapsulates the specific *Zeitgeist* of a new generation, identified with the voice of Tsoi as idol.

The opening sequence of the film positions this discipline as the inadequacy between bold rock music and a law-abiding audience - no clapping nor singing allowed, everyone is sat down obediently, forming an anti-audience. The notion of freedom within limits permeates the song production process, as all lyrics need to be pre-approved by a committee over a canteen meeting. Censorship of words is represented with scarcity of sky and open spaces: cinematography is bound to interior, closed locations - whether it is the Rock Club or Mayk and Natalia's apartment as a gathering point for ideas and illegal music listening. On the other hand, the camera captures

glances, half-smiles, and the forbidden excitement of Viktor and Natalya's affection, juxtaposing public and private images. At the same time, this separation sets up a horizon for transcending both governmental and relationship limits.

Another trick of escapism weaves in episodes of musical interludes (usually tuned to songs by Tsoi's band 'Kino'), which manifest the young artists' desires to defy the order, disturb conservative crowds, start fights, and be irresponsibly expressive. These episodes occur amidst quotidian settings, during a tram or train commute, as the characters burst out singing. The editing merges diegetic and extradiegetic sounds as to resemble musicals. Alas, social rebellion in these sequences is soon cut off, taken out of its whimsical representation, as a sign appears on screen, saying: "This didn't happen". Merging realism in representation, memoir script, and fanciful escapist scenarios, *Leto* seems like an imaginary Michel Gondry rock n roll film.

Still, *Leto* has a fleeting tenderness, which encapsulates both love and creativity as life forces transcending political repression and censorship. In its political consciousness, *Leto* is neither condemning nor victimising its characters, composing the humanistic image of pure freedom, sought in the levity of guitar chords and the inaccurate translations of Lou Reed lyrics. Positioning a Third Space between USSR and West, the film is on the search for its own identity, encompassing the multiple strands of a generation-long journey, which never seems to end. *Leto* voices out this specific Russian Third Space, yet touches upon a universal realization. The film is a melancholic take on the realisation that all of us are (still) living in restrictions – imagining the “big, real” life that we strive to attain while oblivious to human warmth that matters. “I always dreamt about living with you in an old castle and – look at us – living in a shared apartment on a caretaker's wage”, Mayk voices out our daily concerns, freed of political stagnation, to bridge past and present through the fragility of the human condition. This is not rock-n-roll, this is life.

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