

# Assa

SERGEI SOLOVYOV

1987

In the spring of 1988, the Moscow House of Culture witnessed a revolution: over three weeks, it hosted screenings of *Assa* organized by the Art Rock Parade. During the show, the building was circled by police, and people waited in lines for days to buy tickets. This was followed by a concert featuring some of the country's best rock bands, whose members had contributed to the film – Kino, Akvarium and Alisa. From Moscow, the Parade marched on to other Russian cities, and by the time of the film's official premiere in September, the rock wave had covered the entire country.

Directed by Sergei Solovyov, *Assa* (1987) has come to define both the vitality and excitement, but also the sense of a lost future, that dominated in the years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has long since achieved cult classic status with the last Soviet generation as well as with more contemporary audiences. Set in the winter of 1980, at the height of Leonid Brezhnev's Stagnation, *Assa* encapsulates a clash between the old and the new, represented respectively by Krymov, the domineering head of a criminal group who is having an affair with his much younger nurse Alika, and Bananan, a free-spirited underground rock musician. Music plays a huge role in the film, with a soundtrack by Russia rock bands like Akvarium, Kino, and Bravo. To hear music by Russia's leading rock musicians – which people copied from each other using reel-to-reel tape recorders – on the big screen at the end of the 1980s was a shock. This was the first time their music was released freely to the public; the most that rock musicians at the time could hope for was a tiny room and several hundred people listening to them play at a House of Culture (where dancing was often not allowed). Solovyov gave them an audience of millions in an instant.

Famous musicians of the time round out the cast, from lead roles to cameos. Bananan, played by conceptual artist Sergei "Afrika" Bugaev, embodies the ideals of an underground counterculture that emerged in St Petersburg in the early 1980s. Bananan's two dream sequences were created by Yevgeny "Debil" Kondratiev, who together with other members such as Oleg Kotelnikov, Inal Savchenkov, Vadim Ovchinnikov,

employed a raft of innovative cinematic techniques such as scratch animation.

*Assa*'s most iconic scene, however, comes at its very end, and features Viktor Tsoi. The superstar singer of rock band Kino, who died in a car accident in 1990 at the age of 28, Tsoi is sometimes labelled the Russian Kurt Cobain; but in truth his significance to the last Soviet generations ran much deeper than his American counterpart. A figure of pure potential and ambition, Tsoi was outside of, even above institutional politics. At the end of the film, Tsoi attends a job interview for a position as an entertainer at a Yalta restaurant. Defying strict instructions to remain on stage and to wear the approved uniform, Tsoi and his band instead break out into *Changes*, the song that not only catapulted Kino to fame but also spoke to a generation of young people who wanted radical change in the Soviet system. *Changes* were not long in coming: two years after the premiere of *Assa*, Kino drew 70,000 people to a concert at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, and just one year after that the USSR collapsed. The song *Changes* is still a symbol of political change and resistance, and has been heard during the summer 2020 protests in Belarus and the 2021 protests in support of Alexei Navalny in Russia.

Contemporary viewers will no doubt notice with alarm the fact that one of the characters is played by a white man in blackface. In Soviet cinema blackface was often used for villains, particularly when these characters were supposed to herald from the Union's southern and eastern peripheries: for instance, in *White Sun of the Desert* (1970) and *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style* (1967). They represented otherness. In *Assa* the musician Dmitry Shumilov plays the "African" Vitya as a humorous and ironic character, setting the trend for black comedic characters in the '90s and early '00s, notably Balabanov's *Dead Man's Bluff* (2005). This faltering and ill-advised step towards a more open engagement with race notwithstanding, *Assa*'s reiteration of this old trope might hopefully trigger a larger conversation about the representation of black characters in Soviet and post-Soviet popular media.