

By John Fetter

THE FIRST WAVE OF CINEMATIC *perestroika* swept the censors' shelves of virtually all banned movies and allowed Soviet directors greater freedom to tackle previously taboo subjects. If the new film *Zerograd* is any indication, Soviet filmmakers are now turning to a more artistically and politically ambitious subject: *perestroika* itself.

In *Zerograd*, director Karen Chakhnazarov depicts an absurdist Soviet Union where reform is at best an exercise in surrealism. After viewing this superb and hilarious new Soviet film (which won the grand prize at the Chicago International Film Festival in October), one can only wonder: why wasn't such a satire done before? Contemporary Soviet reality is, after all, a gold mine for the ironically inclined.

The simple answer is politics. Brezhnev and Stalin can now be ridiculed within the USSR. But Gorbachov and the present reforms have not hitherto been considered a laughing matter (at least not for export). Now the reform seems to have progressed sufficiently to accommodate potentially unsettling metaphors, and Chakhnazarov takes full advantage of the opportunity.

Coming to a head: *Zerograd* follows the misadventures of Varakin, a Moscow bureaucrat sent to a small provincial factory to arrange the redesign of an air-conditioner part. A sign near the factory's entrance extolling *perestroika* indicates that the time is the present and that the surrounding town of Zerograd is at least formally keeping abreast of current Soviet trends.

Varakin soon discovers, however, that Zerograd is quite exceptional.



A secretary at the factory wears no clothes, the factory head is unaware that his chief engineer has been dead for some time, the railway station doesn't sell tickets for trains back to Moscow. When he stops for lunch at the local restaurant, Varakin is offered a special dessert, a cake in the shape of his own head. Horrified, he refuses even to taste it and consequently the insulted baker commits suicide.

At this point, *Zerograd* ceases to be merely an amiable symbol of stagnant and illogical Brezhnevism. Gradually revealing a world of murky plots and submerged political conflict, *Zerograd* illustrates a Russian problem much older than Gorbachov or Brezhnev: the competition between externally consistent tradition and fundamentally alien external reform.

Twisted histories: Attempting to flee this world, Varakin only falls in deeper. At the outskirts of the city he discovers a museum of the region's history. "Historical truth is the source of our strength," reads the plaque inside, but outlandish falsehoods in fact dominate the museum's exhibits.

A guide shows Varakin a Trojan

tomb and explains that the Trojans settled near Zerograd after the fall of Troy. A display of Romans reveals that the Romans too had settlements in the area. And so the historical fabrications continue into the Stalinist era (for instance, a statue of Zerograd's muscular Stakhanovite). This historical tradition may be faulty—as nonsensical as the naked secretary—but it obeys a certain perverse logic and truly functions as the source of beliefs for Zerograd's inhabitants.

One display stands apart. Amidst all the half-real, half-fabricated detritus of Russian Soviet history, Varakin encounters an exhibit on Zerograd's first two rock'n'rollers, including a tribute to the Young Communist League (Komsomol) president who disgraced them in 1957. A

akin discovers, rock'n'roll is making a comeback in Zerograd under *perestroika*, and the chief protagonists of 1957 are once again at center stage. One of these first rockers, it turns out, was the baker who committed suicide. The Komsomol is revealed as the procurator who suspects the suicide to be a murder.

Yet in this replay of Western decadence vs. Communist purity, the Komsomol-turned-procurator is isolated. He lectures Varakin on the purpose of the state, that it holds the Soviet people together, that it is greater than the individual, that it endures despite the seduction of Western-style reforms of "obvious rationality and practicality."

But all this state-talk is clearly old-fashioned. The inhabitants of Zerograd prefer rock'n'roll. A nightclub named after the dead dancerbaker is billed as a victory for democracy: "through the years of Stalinism, subjectivism, voluntarism and stagnation, we have reserved the right to dance as we like," says one club member.

Mandatory fun: At first glance, then, reform from the outside—riding piggyback on contemporary music—has won. But the pull of

ence of Bill Haley and the Comets. Zerograd's new infatuation with rock'n'roll, like the wandering Trojans and the beery Stakhanovite, is a fiction: slick, corny, packaged. Rather than an expression of true feeling, the music has been transformed into just another illogical tradition, demanding new conformism. Zerograd could not previously rock'n'roll; now all citizens must dance to the new beat (how Zerograd would handle capitalism is an especially frightening thought).

Beneath its amusing nonsense, then, Zerograd is unfortunately all too consistent. The city's inhabitants may engage in strange acts, but they never fundamentally challenge the status quo (or when they do, as the rock'n'rollers did, they are purged). This stranglehold of tradition, more than the paranoia of neo-Stalinists or the muddling through of the neo-Brezhnevites, emerges as the greatest obstacle to reform. Outsiders with plans, even as innocuous as changing a small part in a product, are viewed with amusement or suspicion and forced, explicitly or subtly, to conform to the system's rules.

Varakin could take the easy path and join Zerograd's community. Instead he runs away, literally takes off across a lake in a boat with no paddle. Confronted with the superficial incongruities and the deeper and more disturbing continuities of life in Zerograd, the reformer is forced to admit defeat and exit the system. It is not a pretty message, and fans of the more upbeat tradition of socialist realism may be disappointed. But as a parable of *perestroika*, *Zerograd* proves that Soviet reform can be as challenging artistically as it is politically. **John Fetter** writes regularly on Soviet culture and politics.