

# IN THE ARTS

**Jesus of Montreal**  
Directed by Denys Arcand

By Lawrence Kootnikoff

**A**FTER TAKING ON SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS in *Decline of the American Empire* in 1986, Quebec filmmaker Denys Arcand has now turned his attention to religion. The result, *Jesus of Montreal*, winner of the 1989 Jury Prize at Cannes, is another triumph.

Arcand says the idea came to him four years ago when a previously clean-shaven actor showed up for an audition wearing a beard. "Sorry about the beard," he said, "but I'm

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Jesus now." He was performing *The Way of the Cross*, a passion play, on Montreal's Mount Royal.

"The situation began to haunt me," recalled Arcand. "How could this young actor say every night, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it,' and the next morning audition for an erotic movie or a beer commercial?"

That's one of the questions *Jesus of Montreal* tries to answer, a film Arcand wrote, directed and has a cameo role in. It's a multilayered film, presented with Arcand's trademark understatement, that brings the story of Jesus to a modern-day setting. A young actor, Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), is hired by a Catholic priest, Father Leclerc (Gilles Pelletier), to "modernize" and "update" his church's annual passion play.

**Play of passions:** Bluteau's performance of Daniel/Jesus as a "gentle subversive" is beautifully restrained. While the film's principal target is religion, the theme is the contradictions and absurdity of everyday life, as Arcand elaborated to reporters after Cannes:

"*Jesus of Montreal* refers to the Gospel according to St. Mark, advertising for eau de cologne, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the dubbing of por-

nographic movies, the Big Bang, the formula for Coca-Cola Classic, Hamlet's soliloquy, the inconvenience of being born in Burkina Faso, a Roman soldier by the name of Pantera, fascists who are daily communicants, organ transplants and Paul Newman's salad dressing."

The film is a story within a story and has Arcand's characteristic gentle humor. "Are you looking for Jesus?" a librarian asks Daniel as he researches the character of Jesus, sur-

rounded by theological works and Bibles. "He will find you," she assures him, with a conspiratorial nod.

Daniel's search for a cast parallels Jesus' search for apostles: Constance (Johanne-Marie Tremblay) works in a soup kitchen, Martin (Remy Girard) is dubbing porn films into French, Mireille (Catherine Wilkening) makes commercials for expensive perfumes, and Rene (well-known Quebec playwright Robert Lepage) is narrating a film on as-

trophysics. In scenes that mirror the Gospels in their simplicity ("Come and I will make you fishers of men"), all four drop what they are doing to join Daniel.

Daniel's play, a modernized and moving version of the passion, becomes the hit of the summer. Daniel is hailed as a dramatic genius by some, and by others as a New Age prophet. As the film progresses, the lines between the characters of Daniel and Jesus begin to blur.

**The good cookbook:** There is the temptation of Christ when a brilliant lawyer, who draws up "career plans" for clients, offers his services to Daniel, saying, "With your talent, this town is yours if you want it." Perhaps a book? "Cookbooks are very big this year," the lawyer assures him.

But like Jesus, Daniel soon runs afoul of both religious and civil authority. When producers at a beer commercial audition tell Mireille to take off her shirt, Daniel flies into a rage, overturns tables and cameras and chases the modern-day moneylenders from the set, our 20th-century temple. He is arrested.

His play, questioning Jesus' divinity and the accuracy of his Gospels, even presenting the theory that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier, goes too far for

church authorities. Father Leclerc, a rather pitiful figure who is sleeping with Constance ("I'm not a very good priest," he admits), pleads with Daniel/Jesus to change the script. The play misses the point, he says. "The Haitian cleaning ladies, Guatemalan refugees, the lonely old people who come here [to church] don't want to hear about the latest archeological theories.... They come to be told that God loves them and is waiting for them."

Daniel refuses, and ironically Leclerc must choose between Jesus and the church. The play is banned from church property. But the actors try to present the play one last time.

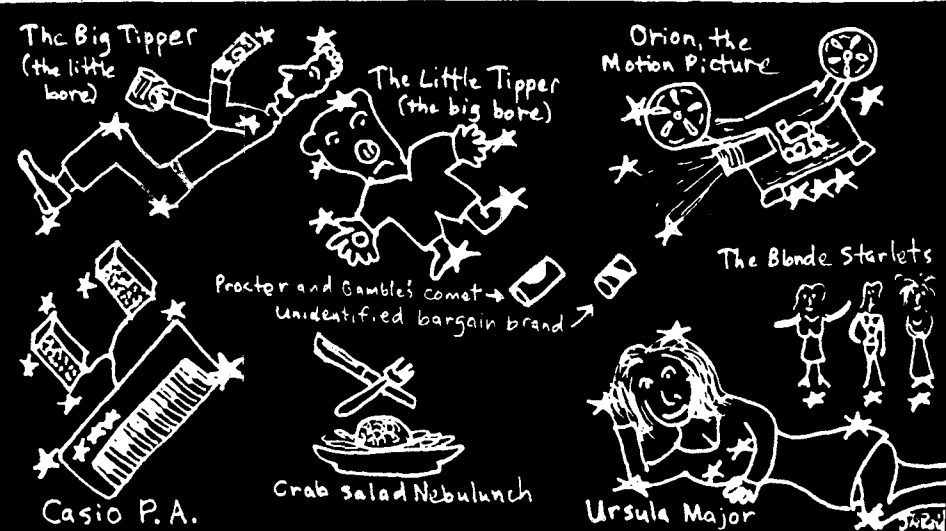
*Jesus of Montreal* is a beautiful film. And Arcand's dialogue sparkles, as usual. Who was Jesus? The film doesn't really answer that question. Does it really matter? Arcand's own point of view is clear from the first minutes of the film, a stage adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov*: "We must destroy the idea of God in the spirit of Man!" cries Smerdiakov. "Only then will everyone know he is mortal, without hope of resurrection.... Man will cease to murmur against the shortness of life and will love his brothers with a disinterested affection."

Lawrence Kootnikoff is a writer living in Quebec City.



The show must go on: Catherine Wilkening, Lothaire Bluteau and Johanne-Marie Tremblay in *Jesus of Montreal*.

## Modern Constellations





**Zerograd**  
Directed by Karen Chakhnazarov

By John Feffer

**T**HE 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 Gorbachiov 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.

## Sects, lies and underlying logic

# ZEROGRAD

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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 Varatin 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 dancer/baker 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

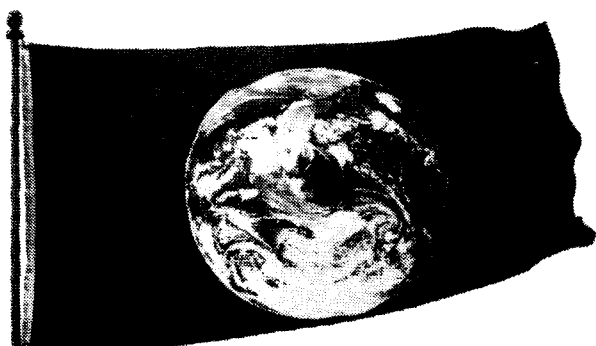
*Zerograd's* tradition is clearly greater than either the procurator's neo-Stalinism or the liberating influence of Bill Haley and the Comets. *Zerograd's* new infatuation with rock'n'roll, like the wandering Trojans and the beefy Stakhanovite, is a fiction: slick, corny, packaged. Rather than an expression 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 Feffer writes regularly on Soviet culture and politics.

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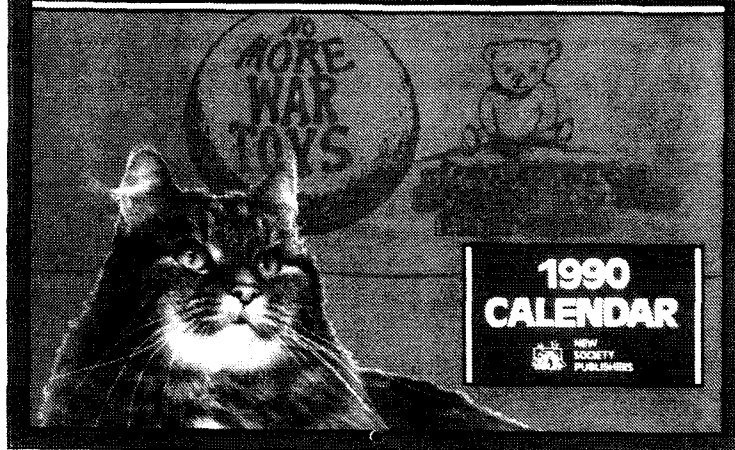
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