

Generation P Reviews

Rossiiskaya Gazeta, April 14, 2011

Eternally censored questions of Russian History

Or, what is to be done, who is to blame, and where the P dog slumbers

By Oksana Naralenkova

The first and only adaptation of a novel by Victor Pelevin has hit the screens. Viewers and critics are divided about what to make of Generation P.

The first adaption of Victor Pelevin's most popular novel, *Generation P*, has once again raised cursed questions about cinema and about contemporary Russian reality.

First of all, is it even possible to adequately convey literary text through cinema? After all, cinema is first and foremost a visual art. Even more so, this question applies to Pelevin's text, where most of the plot unravels in the consciousness of its main character, Vavilen Tatarsky.

To expect a literal narration of a book from a movie is a merciless exercise from the viewer's point of view. Your nerves become as tense as steel, while only a handful of directors can reach the level of Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace*. But it isn't really necessary to scrupulously replicate on screen a work whose rational essence can be summed up in one sentence: consumer society has reached a point where it's not the products that help people, but the people that go on to feed the global Matrix, the goddess Ishtar (in Pelevin's understanding) who can choose a representative of herself on earth, and then in a moment consume him as a sacrifice to her insatiable soul-eating essence.

The 21st century is an age of fakes, when what is real is replaced by its digital matrix. This applies equally to the economy, which has lost its physical equivalent – gold – and culture, where emotions, which have a certain span and must be suffered through, are replaced by the wow-factor – a sense of wonder lasting no more than a second. And human relations have been replaced by mechanical answers in social networks. People as robots, people as functions who they have no more personal initiative. Pelevin captured this transformation ten years ago. Since then, the disease of replacing values with fakes has been progressing.

Director Victor Ginzburg succeeded in the most important aspect – he accurately conveyed this message, this sense of mystical desperation from feeling sucked in and from not being able to refuse to follow the rules of the game.

From his detailed reconstruction of Russia's reality from the 1990s – with its kiosk sellers, its gangsters, shootouts, maroon jackets and its Pepsi generation – Ginzburg gradually moves towards the all-encompassing Matrix: when you can generate any digital politician you like and broadcast him on television, when millions of dollars are needed only to throw them in the trash by ordering an ad campaign based on the principle “the worse the better,” and when TV anchors and PR technologists become priests to one single idol – Consumption. Ginzburg takes this theme to the absurd. The ritual murder of Azadovsky takes place in the Ostankino television studio, which also serves as Ishtar's temple. And Vavilen becomes the earthly embodiment of a god, knowing full well that he is merely a base creature. The aggression of the 1990s is replaced by the pleasure-less intoxication of the 2000s. It's an intoxication that no longer brings any joy to Generation P, which has by now reached its forties.

Essentially, Pelevin, as a writer who has philosophically laid out the whole problem of reality's transformation, should now write another novel on what happens next. Clearly, the cycle should come full circle and either go for another round, or return to the starting point. But the author hasn't come up with such a concept yet. He keeps telling the same story from one novel to the next. There's another question raised by the film adaptation of Generation P: will this topic be understandable for those who have only heard about the realities of the 1990s? Then again, it becomes obvious from the film that this reality hasn't really changed, it has only intensified.

There's no longer that sense of aggression where each wants his piece of the pie. It's been replaced by habit. Television as a “zombie box” and PR technologies as a brainwashing mechanism – all this has been accepted and taken for granted. All these concepts are part of the lexicon of the average young person. So why won't he understand a film that speaks of these very concepts through the language of metaphor?

For those who grew up in the 1990s, who read Pelevin's novel while young as a revelation, enjoying each phrase, the film will be a good chance for nostalgia over those carefree, revolutionary days. And even today we can be happy for Little Vovchik (wonderfully played by Oleg Taktarov) who asks – on screen and not from the pages of the novel – to come up with an ad slogan for the Russian national idea so that every pimply Harvard geek can understand where the P dog slumbers and what will happen when it awakes. An ad slogan so effective that no wise guy will talk to Vovchik about Shakespeare ever again. Or the natural Sergei Shnurov as Gireyev – the Russian Tibetan, who complements his spiritual searches with nibbles on fly agar and vodka. In opposition to Azadovsky (Mikhail Yefremov) and Khanin (Alexander Gordon), together with other priests of the Matrix, these two – Little Vovchik and Gireyev in themselves make up that Russian national idea, a force without reason and a reason without force that will

never join together. This flat-headed gangster and murky philosopher are for real, while everyone else, elegantly dressed and talking right, are fakes, mere puppets. To understand this you don't need to re-read Pelevin before going to the movie theater. You don't need to read him at all. Everything is clear right from the screen.

<http://www.argumenti.ru/culture/n285/103324>

Arguments of the Week, April 20, 2011argumenti

The Pelevin Case is Alive and Well

By Tatyana Moskvina

Generation P – an adaptation of Viktor Pelevin's novel – has just hit theater screens. It's a rare combination of a good novel being adapted in a talented way. This movie isn't about cocaine, magic mushrooms, advertising or the Roaring Nineties, as those who never actually saw the movie often write. It's a movie about a country gone berserk, a country that got a whiff of freedom and went insane, losing a whole generation of desperate boys who turned into sons of bitches and remorseless jerks.

It's a satire, but in the real sense, in the tradition of Jonathan Swift and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. And as in any true satire, it has elements of the phantasmagoric. As such, it's a talented way to spit in the face of all the norms of today's lousy life (and I mean its social dimension – not the individual dimension, where it's still possible to live).

So it's no surprise that the government didn't spend a ruble on this movie. Financing hundreds of pieces of cinematic crap each year, the government made an exception for this film. And it's not hard to understand why. Every movie financed by the government today is conformist and sycophantic. It is silent about the truth. It's normally not clear what it's trying to say; at most it likes to make mysterious hints. Experts overseeing the financing stage consistently ditch any movie with social criticism.

But Pelevin in his totality is social criticism, and very biting at that. That is why the Kremlin seethes with hatred towards him. Pelevin himself doesn't hate anyone – he's just a little bemused as to why the pleasant illusion of life takes on such excruciating convulsions for Russians, turning into intolerable idiocy. And why the proverbial gang of bandits who have taken over Russia's natural resources devise such complicated and exhausting ways of presenting themselves.

Generation P was directed by Victor Ginzburg - and I don't know this name. Given that the late Roman Trachtenberg makes an appearance, this movie

must have gone through a long and difficult journey. But Pelevin's plot has been preserved. And his jokes have been given appropriate visual form.

Babylen Tatarsky, the main character, who goes from rags to riches, who winds up on the peak of the country's political Olympus after starting out as a kiosk seller, is played by the young actor Vladimir Yepifantsev, and that's an advantage. His soft, cloudy face at first doesn't seem very expressive. But by the end of the film, it's clear that this is because the actor has enough taste to understand how to transform his character without grimaces. Yepifantsev succeeds in showing the conformism of his character and his ability to take on any appearance required. Starting out as a nerd with a mullet, he's transformed into a clean-cut clerk, and then a successful "creative," finally to take on the fine-chiseled features of a man of his time, whose exploits are immortalized by real-life TV anchor Leonid Parfyonov. In other words, he becomes a hopeless cynic with empty, arrogant eyes who has lost any sense of shame. But he still remains charming!

Is the hero to blame for this metamorphosis? We can expand the question. Should we blame a whole generation of people born in the early 1970s for the bit of bloodshed Russia saw in the 1990s, for the tens of thousands of shameless cutthroats that emerged in society, and who continue to run things to this day? Or were they deceived, thrown out on the street of history, and forced to stomp on others, so as not to be stomped on themselves?

Pelevin has given his answer: of course, they have themselves to blame. But remember, too, that a man doesn't have to take part in anything, and can just disappear into a marginal crack – much like Tatarsky's friend, the "Tibetan astrologist" Gireyev (charmingly played by rock legend Sergei Shnurov in the film). But if you've gone into the dark forest, into the wild field of common life, then you will be molded by the forces ruling forest and field.

The Orthodox Christians call them demons. But free-thinking smart-alecks like the author of the novel call them husbands of the Goddess Ishtar, the rulers of Babylon. After all, it was Rome that could fall and be revived anew. But Babylon, with its tower and its mix of languages, is always with us. Babylon is the inhuman, bloodthirsty order of life, where everyone bows only to strength and success – and strength and success is gold.

The dark tower of this Babylon is called the Institute of Apiculture, ruled by the savvy imbecile Leonid Azadovsky (brilliantly played, as always, by Mikhail Yefremov). It's where political tele-mannequins are artfully brought to life on computer screens. All this is depicted with a biting satirical force that is rare for our cinema. On screen, it's still the epoch of the awkward

Yeltsin. But the “creators” of Babylon are already grooming someone new, someone more slick and glamorous. After all, Pelevin is not criticizing the government, he’s doing something a lot worse - he’s denying them all rights to reality. These people cannot exist in the real world, he seems to be saying. Real people cannot treat others this way for so long!

It’s all a mirage, they were all created digitally....but by who? That’s the question the main character keeps asking, until he himself becomes the husband of Ishtar, and stops asking questions. So who is it then? It is you. And the rest of your “Generation P.” You allowed all these scoundrels to exist. You worshipped the golden idol of a bloodthirsty goddess....

The evident success of the novel’s screen adaptation (theaters are filled with young people, excited about the film) proves what I’ve been shouting about for so many years: Filmmakers! Read good modern literature and make movies out of it! But no, they don’t read anything - and complain about a crisis of ideas. But that crisis is really about a desire to live off government funding, getting treasury money for nonsense, and everyone’s allowed to do it.

Generation P is a very timely film. Light and funny in form, it is abrasive and cutting in essence. A lot of intellect went into producing this movie, and when was the last time you’ve seen intellect?

<http://www.newizv.ru/news/2011-04-28/144254/>

Izvestia, April 28, 2011
A world without a Creator
By Victor Matizen

A film based on Victor Pelevin’s novel, *Generation P*, has hit the screens. It is about the 1990s, when Russian life experienced a burst of freedom – including freedom of imagination. The main character is a creator of phantoms that are uploaded into the minds of his audience through television, and are used to control their behavior. The chief question – who controls this factory of illusions – is answered in the manner of Horatio: “Don’t ask, it is not for you to know.”

Pelevin became a cult writer in the 1990s, but only a few attempts have been made to adapt some of his stories to film, like Ulyana Shilkina’s 1999 short film, *Nothing To Be Afraid Of*. The adaptation of *Generation P* to film was undertaken by the Russian-American Victor Ginzburg, which only underlines the clumsiness and reluctance of domestic directors to pursue cutting edge topics.

Though a lot of time has passed since the novel was published (which allows for a liberal interpretation of the text), the direction did not change the plot. His protagonist, Vavilen Tatarsky, played by Vladimir Yepifantsev, follows the same path as his literary prototype: from a threadbare intellectual half-educated in applied science and half in liberal arts, he turns into a successful advertising copywriter and enters the very heart of the industry of images – that factory which creates virtual politicians who exist only in the digital world. For the sake of being more convincing, the film flashes all sorts of media personalities. But the viewer is supposed to understand that in Pelevin's world, the names and faces of people like Andrei Vasilyev, Alexander Gordon, Roman Trakhtenberg and Vasily Gorchakov “do not pertain to the real market product but only to their projections on the informational space of politics and trade.”

For Pelevin, the path undertaken by his main character hasn't been so much one of movement through time and space as one through knowledge - through Gnostic shock towards the truth. This is equally applicable to the main character in his first novel, *Omon Ra*, who discovers that the Soviet space program is merely a spectacle staged in a dirty underground tunnel, and to the protagonist of *Generation P*, who uncovers that everything is not what it seems.

This sad and perhaps even tragic discovery does not mean that the novel and the film are sad. The reason is in the author's ironic, detached distance. Pelevin's verbal cunning and Ginzburg's visual fantasy present a gnosis of the tragicomic. The ambitions of advertisers become subject to ridicule, their approaches are made fun of, and a biting sarcasm is applied to all of contemporary civilization.

It is particularly refreshing that despite all its comedy, the film has nothing in common with the so-called “romantic company” which, as presented by contemporary Russian filmmakers, evokes nothing but nausea in educated people (which may well be the unconscious objective of their producers). Key to this is the fact that the world of *Generation P* is a man's world where there are no gays, practically no women, and thus no sickeningly sweet kisses or sex scenes. There is no glossy glamour. What is interesting is that there are so many people in Russia who are willing to watch an intelligent film....

<http://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2011/09/03/film-review-can-generation-ps-cultural-references-play-abroad/>

Antenna, September 3, 2011

Film Review: Can Generation P's Cultural References Play Abroad?

By Booth Wilson

Most scholars of media have at some point stumbled onto something from another country without the proper frame of reference and been utterly bewildered by it, perhaps resulting in amusement or fascination. *Generation P*, a Russian film released this April now making some appearances on the film festival circuit, seems to be an example of a film that is consciously playing up this experience as part of its appeal for a niche foreign market. As *Variety* put it in its recent [review](#), “A bit too inside-Russia for commercial export, this local indie hit still feels Western enough to build something of an underground aud abroad.”

The film is adapted from a well-known novel by Viktor Pelevin, which has been translated into English first as “Babylon” in the UK, then later as “Homo Zapiens” in the US - why a title originally in English needed to be changed is anyone’s guess. The novel is a thick slice of literary postmodernism, appropriately adapted to screen in a hallucinatory, effects-heavy style.

Vavilen (the unusual and rather embarrassing name, created from Vasily Aksyonov, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, instantly pegs his parents as members of the idealistic 1960’s Soviet generation, and also is a homonym for “Babylon.”) Tatarsky, a former literature student in a dead-end job shortly after the USSR’s collapse, chances into work at a firm that creates Russian-themed advertisements for Western companies trying to make inroads in the new market. It is hoped that he will tap into the Russian psyche through the right “cultural references” - the Russians use the English loan word instead of trying to translate this concept. Vavilen tries to uncover the secrets of marketing by binging on magic mushrooms, LSD, and, yes, vodka. The experience with altered states of consciousness proves to be adequate preparation for his gradual discovery of the secret forces at work behind this paranoid, Baudrillardian vision of post-Soviet society.

Of course, outlandish advertisements are a running gag:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=nXzhkla_On4

Here’s an attempt to sell motorcycles by playing on anti-Semitism.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=0XS48fmmOIE

Foreigners will undoubtedly recognize the products, and the Slavicized spellings will add to the humor, but what might get lost is the film’s satirical edge. For Russian viewers, these ads might call to mind the types of advertisements that ran in the 90’s, which sometimes were equally

bizarre miniature movies devoid of information about a purported product. *Generation P* is social commentary with historical sweep. Parts of it, such as a long-winded diatribe about the evils of television by the disembodied head of Che Guavara, might even seem overly moralizing if not for the film's general irreverence.

The psychedelic plot elements of the novel are a fortuitous circumstance. Many of its jokes could still land for an American viewer, but more at the level of stoner humor — the cultural disconnects actually can work to the film's advantage. After all, stoners don't care if they get the joke, so long as it "blows your mind."

In my mind, the film is significant and notable for being one of the few recent Russian movies that might garner descriptors like "cool," "hip," "edgy," or "pop literate" - even outside of its country. The Russian film industry has managed to develop a modest, but healthy commercial cinema based on Hollywood's model, of which *Night Watch* was a surprise hit abroad. A more typical example might be [Piter FM](#), which follows the conventions of the Hollywood romantic comedy to a T. Foreign audiences on the festival circuit also know art-film directors like Aleksandr Sokurov, who make self-consciously serious cinema for cultivated audiences. But *Generation P* seems to be something different from both these trends, more akin to, say, *Videodrome*, *Fight Club*, or more recently *Gamer* - films which strive, perhaps desperately, to make statements on contemporary society, but also offer good old-fashioned entertainment to those who want to turn off their minds or do not find their ideas particularly revelatory. The result may be hard to follow, but it is certainly an exciting development, or as a Russian acquaintance put it, "a welcome break from so much [chernukha](#)." Try it, if it makes it to your country.

<http://tiff.net/filmsandschedules/tiff/2011/generationp>

Toronto International Film Festival

By Colin Geddes, programmer, VANGUARD section

Acid trips. Mesopotamian conspiracy theories. The spirit of Che Guevara summoned by a Ouija board. These aren't what one thinks of when it comes to Russian cinema, but *Generation P* is a game changer that explodes with unique and outrageous style.

Based on Victor Pelevin's bestselling cult novel, *Generation P* follows the exploits of a disillusioned young poet named Babylen Tatarsky (Vladimir Yepifantsev) during the drab days of post-communist Moscow. He joins an advertising agency and discovers a knack for creating subversive campaigns that put distinctively Russian twists on Western-style goods,

feeding the mad dash to rebrand the Russian dream for a new age of mass consumerism.

When Babylen hits a dry spell, he goes on a bender, devouring a cocktail of LSD, mushrooms, cocaine and vodka. His intention was simply to kick-start his creative process, but in the resulting head trip he encounters the revelation that there is no difference between virtual reality and the actual world. He finds an unexpected muse in the ghost of Che Guevara, who proceeds to educate him on the theory of “WOWism,” or how television destroys the individual spirit.

Babylen’s world is jolted further as he’s introduced to disposable spin doctors, gangsters and an agency serving as a front for a Babylonian cult that worships the goddess Ishtar. She offers him control of a mechanism that produces “simple human happiness” and can ultimately manipulate the world.

In the eyes of the old-school art-house elite, *Generation P* will be an angry young upstart: course, cynical, vulgar and brash. But these are the very qualities that make it so refreshing. Director Victor Ginzburg deftly navigates the novel’s complex narrative structure to create a film steeped in cyberpunk mysticism and social satire, akin to *How to Get Ahead in Advertising*, the work of William S. Burroughs and perhaps that wild-eyed madman on the street who spews conspiracy theories while asking for change. The casual viewer might be rattled by the film’s machine-gun assault of Russian slang, pop-cult and political-history references — but rest assured, *Generation P* is never boring.

<http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/toronto-2011-days-five-and-six>

Toronto 2011. Days Five and Six
By Dan Sallitt

At Toronto's halfway mark, yet another terrific Russian film surprised me: Victor Ginsburg's *Generation P*, which opened domestically before appearing at this year's Moscow and Karlovy Vary festivals. Based on a 1999 novel by Victor Pelevin, the fast-paced, effect-filled movie tracks a young intellectual's progress through the chaotic post-Soviet years, when he stumbles into the burgeoning advertising business and eventually finds himself manipulating a vast quasi-governmental propaganda machine. The joy of the film is that the smart and able protagonist is neither a naif nor a cynic, and preserves throughout his progress a connection to his youthful philosophies, which lean toward a lysergic mysticism. Managing to convey the amoral brio of dizzying success while keeping a humorous and thoughtful perspective front and center, *Generation P* is insightful about

and accepting of the multiple and contradictory lives that people live.

<http://www2.macleans.ca/2011/09/16/back-in-the-ussr-on-lsd/#more-215706>

Macleans, September 16, 2011

Back in the USSR...on LSD

By Brian D. Johnson

As journalists at TIFF, we spend most of our time chasing Important Movies and bagging celebrity interviews. As a result, we don't have time to enjoy the most exclusive activity a film festival has to offer: discovering far-flung curiosities of world cinema. So at some point during TIFF, I like to go off-road and see something wild. A few days ago, I found that opportunity, utterly by chance. After seeing the Neil Young documentary with my wife and son - a rare festival family outing - we were looking for a drink in the Lightbox and got dragged into a party for visiting filmmakers. I ended up sitting beside a genial director named Victor Ginzburg, who was born in Russia and emigrated to the US in his teens. After our conversation, I was intrigued enough that I had to see his film.

He's directed a feature in TIFF's Vanguard program called *Generation P*, a hallucinogenic satire set in Moscow after the fall of the Soviet Union. It may well be one of the wildest films at the festival. It mixes the Chechen mafia, a dancing Boris Yeltsin, spin doctors fronting a Babylonian cult, computer-generated virtual politicians, Marshall McLuhan, magic mushrooms, LSD, and vast whorls of cocaine forming a mandala on a Persian rug. *Generation P* - the P stands for Pepsi - has the freaky fizz of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, infused with the kind of barking-mad post-Soviet surrealism practiced by Dusan Makavejev and Emir Kusturica.

Based on Victor Pelevin's best-selling cult novel, it's the story of Babylen Tatarsky (Vladimir Yepifantsev), a poet who gets hired as an advertising copy writer. Babylen's job is to rebrand Russia by creating perverse slogans for the new onslaught of Western products. He promotes Coke as a violently fundamentalist option to Pepsi. An ad for a Christian church promises "a first class Lord for first class people." A funeral parlour is flogged with the slogan, "Diamonds are not forever." And a grisly scene of a medieval beheading drives home a pitch for Head and Shoulders - "Keep them together."

While trying to fuel his creative juices, Babylen binges on psychedelic drugs, vodka and cocaine. He communes with the ghost of Che Guevara via a ouija board. And he loses himself in the coils of a Mesopotamian conspiracy, involving a ziggurat that takes the form of a twisted ruin of a parking garage. Ginzburg uses nifty graphic overlays and visual effects to

create fairly authentic simulations of drug trips (always tricky on film). While watching the film dead straight in the early morning, I got completely lost in the byzantine narrative, which seemed tangled with arcane references. But I didn't mind.

Ginzburg tells me his film has shown on 500 screens in Russia. And that Vladimir Putin is a fan. All of that is pretty remarkable considering how avant-garde it is; one can't imagine a similar release for such fare in North America. Generation P is also on Russia's shortlist for submission to the foreign-language category of the Oscars. Stranger things have happened. But not many.

<http://thetfs.ca/2011/09/22/review-generation-p-tiff-2011/>

Toronto Film Scene, September 22, 2011
Review: Generation P – TIFF 2011
By Shane McNeil

Not every generation gets as distinct a genesis as the one the new Russia got when communism finally fell in 1989. Physically one wall fell. But ideologically, it took the entire world down with it for the former USSR.

Generation P (the film) kicks in as soon as Generation P (those that were adults-age at the time of the iron curtain's fall) was exposed to the Western world like a screeching new-born. 'The end of Soviet eternity,' as filmmaker Victor Ginzburg put it, presented a wholesale ideological change, allowing a select few to re-shape Russian consumer culture. These select few – the core characters of the film – not only re-shape ideology, but in many ways shape it for the very first time.

On a base level, this is the dilemma Generation P grapples with. How do you convince an entire people that have never considered the idea of choice to suddenly relate to one particular brand or idea. Therein lies the depth of Generation P. It's not just choice in the consumer sense that Russia was deprived of under Soviet rule, but social, economical and political choice as well. Brands and their particular Western associations had not permeated the Russian psyche, so everything was brand new in their meanings and representations. It's one challenge to convince Russia to choose Sprite or Parliament cigarettes, but it's another to convince them to choose Yeltsin. Or is it?

This is where Generation P's genius really kicks in and where the protagonist, Babylen (clever wordplay on the ancient city of Babylon), begins to fall down the rabbit-hole. What he experiences as he dips his toe into the advertising waters is a mixture of western pop culture, Soviet

folklore, biblical mythology and post-apocalyptic dystopian nightmares. Babylen learns to edit all these elements together to master the art of manipulating the often lazy and cynical post-Soviet subconscious. He discovers that a golden arch is as good as a golden calf to a new generation unaccustomed to consumerism and takes an iconographic approach to his advertising. He declares to God in one particular vision: "For thee I will write a great slogan: 'A First-Class God for a First-Class People!'" It's that kind of irreverence that gives Generation P its life.

Although the film is rife with local images and slang that will only fully be appreciated by a Russian audience, the film has a frank energy that has scant been seen by the country's national cinema of late. It's a film that seems to enjoy getting a step ahead of its audience just before it backtracks to let them in on the joke. On paper that approach may seem alienating, but Ginzburg always brings the joke back with such a wink and such a great punch-line that the reward is almost always worth the wait.

For a generation of film-goers (Russian and otherwise) that has seen the new Russia develop before its eyes, the timing seems perfect for satire. Generation P foreshadows Putin's iron fist by showing the kind of spin that became possible amidst the chaos and freewheeling consumerism of the Yeltsin years. What's most impressive, though, is Ginzburg's touch that keeps the satirical level so consistently high. The warning is there without over-emphasizing the dread. He is therefore able to spin what has happened in Russia over the past 20 years (the good and the bad) smirkingly with what could have happened.

All the while Ginzburg manages to preserve novelist Victor Pelevin's intent, tone and wisecracks to how the current situation came about. It would be easy to come off as preachy or heavy-handed with the scenario Generation P presents, but the film navigates the balance perfectly. While definitely following a cynical track, Ginzburg doesn't abandon all trace of hope. So, in the end, despite the jokes being in Russian, it never feels like the jokes are on Russia.

<http://www.kinokultura.com/2011/34r-generationp.shtml>

KinoKultura, October 2011
Viktor Ginzburg: *Generation P* (2011)
by Anthony Anemone

A surprise hit of the spring and summer of 2011, Viktor Ginzburg's *Generation P* has proven wrong those who thought Pelevin's 1999 cult novel about the rise of the advertising industry in Post-Soviet Russia was simply unfilmable. The film not only generated larger box office receipts

(\$4.3 million) from domestic theaters than any other Russian film this summer, it also had a successful run at numerous film festivals, including Moscow, Kinotavr, Toronto, Serbia, Mumbai, and Karlovy Vary, where it won a Crystal Globe in the competition for new films from East and Central Europe. The film's success, in all senses, is even more remarkable when one realizes that this is Ginzburg's first full-length feature film. *Generation P* should vault its director Viktor Ginzburg, to the top rank of filmmakers working in Russian today.

Born in Moscow in 1959, Ginzburg emigrated with his parents to the US at the age of 15. Educated at The New School and the NY School of Visual Arts, Ginzburg now lives in Los Angeles, where he is a successful director of commercials (e.g., soft drinks, jeans, bank cards, shampoo), music videos (for Belinda Carlisle, Pat Benatar, Lou Reed, Gorky Park, and others) and documentary features (*Hurricane David*, 1980; *Alien Probe*, 1985). In 1993, Ginzburg visited Russia, where he made his first full-length documentary, *The Restless Garden* (*Neskuchnyi sad*, 1994), a scandalous pseudo-documentary about the sexual revolution in post-Soviet Russia and its underground pioneers, which Russian critics panned as "typical pornography." Ten years later, when Ginzburg secured from Pelevin the rights to adapt *Generation P* for the screen, no Russian film studio would agree to back the project. Although the movie was completed and released under the auspices of the Gorky Film Studio, Ginzburg was forced to finance the film independently, which accounts for it taking five years (2006-11) to reach theaters. Happily, it was worth the wait.



As readers of the novel know, *Generation P* tells the story of Vavilen Tatarskii (Vladimir Epifantsev) as he tries to make his way in capitalist Post-Soviet Moscow. Born in the last years of the Soviet Union, the members of Generation P like Vavilen, (the name is an acronym based on Vasillii Aksenov and Vlad Lenin), grew up believing in the promises of both

communism and the Pepsi lifestyle. But when the Soviet Union and its subsidized high culture collapsed, an entire generation found itself stranded in a world of rampant criminality and unrestrained capitalism. In adapting to the new economic and social realities, Generation P had to become cynical pragmatists in order to survive. After graduating from the Literary Institute, for example, Tatarskii is forced to accept work selling beer, candy, cigarettes and prophylactics from a street kiosk run by the Chechen mafia.



Tatarskii is introduced into the world of advertising by an old college chum, Morkovin (Andrei Fomin), who explains the need to translate the ubiquitous western brands flooding into the market for Russian consumers. Advertising is not only, as our hero eventually discovers, where the money is, but it also contains the key to real power in contemporary Russia. The film follows Tatarskii as he moves from commercial advertisements to nationalist ad campaigns, including an abortive campaign to discover a Russian idea to replace the discredited Soviet ideology, and, finally, to the fabrication of compromising political propaganda (“Black PR” and “Compromat”). As Tatarskii rises in the world of advertising, he simultaneously conducts a parallel existence with the help of another old friend, the Buddhist non-conformist Gireyev. Searching for inspiration and insight into the new world, and using Gireyev’s hallucinogenic mushrooms, Tatarskii constantly encounters images from Mesopotamian religion and mythology that mysteriously hint at a connection between the ancient Babylonian cult of Ishtar and contemporary Russian life.



Vavilen's search for happiness and the meaning of the post-Soviet world, stimulated by copious amounts of alcohol, cocaine, LSD and mushrooms, provides the director ample opportunities to visualize his character's visions, fantasies and hallucinations in striking ways. As we follow Vavilen's rise from kiosk vendor to successful advertising man to the head of the advertising agency, we see not only the criminal nature of Post-Soviet commercial life, but the absurd aspects of commercial advertising (the "Wow" effect), and advertising's role in manipulating the economic and political lives of their customers. This theme culminates in the transformation of the chauffeur Kolia into Nikolai Smirnov, a presidential candidate whose election is manufactured by the advertising agency. By the end of the film, Vavilen has become the head of the advertising agency and the goddess Ishtar's consort, while his digital image has become ubiquitous in hilarious commercials on Russian television for Head and Shoulders featuring Stenka Razin (slogan, "After your head has been cut off, they won't cry about your hair"), Coca-Cola (slogan, "There they are in great dread, for God is with the Righteous Generation"), American Express (slogan, "The world - where business meets money"), and Tuborg beer (slogan, "Sta, viator!").



The difficulties of adapting cult novels to the screen are well known: stay too close to the source and be accused of lacking imagination, stray too far from it and be criticized for insufficient respect for the original. Although much of Pelevin's endlessly inventive novel had to be jettisoned in order to keep the film's running time below two hours, the movie's plot and language follow the novel quite closely. Through the creative use of computer graphics, Ginzburg succeeds in visualizing long stretches of text that simply cannot be included in the film (e.g., Che Guevara's speeches, and the ideology of ORANUS). And Ginzburg's main invention – the digital transformation of the straight-talking chauffeur Kolia (Andrei Panin) into a leading contender for the presidency - is a brilliant, and logical, extension of the novel. Some might even argue that Ginzburg's version is clearer and more effective than the much longer and digressive novel.



While the parodies of commercial advertising are brilliant and hilarious (my personal favorites include the ads for Parliament, Tic-Tacs, Head and

Shoulders, and God), both novel and film are dedicated to making visible the vague feeling of so many dispossessed people, not only in Russia, that the levers of power in their worlds are controlled by mysterious forces beyond their understanding. Tatarskii's hallucinations about Babylon eventually merge with reality and we learn that modern devotees of the cult of Ishtar control Russia's economic and political life. Viewers familiar with Pelevin's stylistic quirks and thematic obsessions (e.g., simulated reality, altered consciousness, Buddhism, ancient mythology, conspiracy theories) will readily understand that the secret elite could have just as easily been called the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons, or the Illuminati.

One final way of approaching (and enjoying) *Generation P* is as a satirical version of *Mad Men*, set in Russia during the 1990s. Ginzburg shows the ad men seeking inspiration, researching campaigns, pitching ideas to potential clients, storyboarding and animating commercials, before he shows fully realized TV ads. But if *Mad Men*'s criticism of American sexism and racism is sometimes lost under the nostalgic and attractive image of life and work in the 1950s, Ginzburg's criticism of the criminality, commercialism, greed, and brutality of Russian life in the 1990s cannot be missed.

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