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Playing the Fool: Analyzing the Phenomena of *Iurodstvo*  
In Contemporary Russian Cinema and Civil Society.

An Honors Paper for the Department of Russian  
By Colby Silva Santana

Bowdoin College, 2023

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To my family, without whom none of this would have been.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am enormously grateful for the support, guidance, and heart of my advisor Professor Reed Johnson and committee members, Professor Miroslava Nikolova and Professor Laura Henry. In a larger sense, I am thankful and indebted to the Bowdoin Russian Department for always supporting me and making me feel at home here at Bowdoin.

I also owe a significant thank you to all my friends and loved ones who bore with me throughout this process. I thank those who watched countless Russian movies with me or listened to my endless rantings on the subject for your care and patience.

Finally, I would like to make a special mention of Lisa Hayden. Through her excellent translation of Eugene Vodolazkin's 2013 book *Laurus*, I first became interested in the subject of holy foolery. From one Mainer to another, thank you.

## ABSTRACT

Of Russia's cultural and religious icons, the holy fool (*iurodivy*) is quite possibly the most significant one of contemporary times. The holy fool – a historical and cultural character that feigns insanity to produce moral and spiritual reflections and hide the purity of their souls – has left its traces over a significant portion of Russia's literary history, postmodern tradition, and socio-political thought. In its uniquely positioned role as a powerful form of institutional critique, today taking shape in modern-day political protest performance culture, the holy fool has often been utilized to interrogate the intertwined relationship of the Russian state and the Orthodox Church. This analysis reviews the scholarship on holy foolery and how it has manifested in various fields of study. Although scholarship on this subject is significant, there exists a lack of research into representation of the holy fool in contemporary Russian cinema. Cinema is uniquely positioned to portray holy foolery, thanks to the unique form of spectatorship the film camera allows. This thesis analyzes several case studies of 21st-century Russian cinema that feature characters representing qualities of *iurodstvo* and its related models. In doing so, this work traces the history and development of *iurodstvo* through the lens of cinema and suggests new ways of understanding holy foolery's manifestation as a political tool.

## INTRODUCTION TO HOLY FOOLERY

After spending twenty-nine years living in the desert, Saint Symeon Salos walked through the gates of Emesa dragging a dead dog behind him.<sup>1</sup> Having found the corpse just outside the city gates, Symeon tied a belt around the dog's paw, and brought the animal to a local children's school. The children, witnessing the horrifying sight, subsequently went after the Saint, cursing and beating him on his way. Notably, this nonsensical action wouldn't be the Saint's last, as he would spend the next few years tipping over pastry tables at the market, defecating in the streets, throwing stones at passersby, and parading around temples in the nude.<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of an outsider, Symeon's actions appear to depict a man suffering from an undiagnosed mental illness. Ironically, that was his goal.

Saint Symeon's actions can be better understood as belonging to the Byzantine Orthodox tradition of *salia/salos*, or as it's known in the Russian context, *iurodstvo*.<sup>3</sup> In English this behavioral model goes under the name of holy foolery, which aptly describes the fool's paradoxical and religious motivations. *Salia* is a radical manifestation of Christian kenosis<sup>4</sup> and asceticism<sup>5</sup> that was originally developed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century whereby feigned madness is

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<sup>1</sup> Simeon's act is intended to recreate Jesus carrying the cross in Jerusalem. In this process, both Jesus and Simeon were belittled and made fun of by their respective crowds of spectators. In Symeon replacing the cross with a dead dog, the holy fool imparts a carnivalesque and "insane" feel to his performance.

<sup>2</sup> Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.

<sup>3</sup> This behavioral model exists under a whole host of names with slight differences in spelling and etymology. This paper uses the terms holy fool and holy foolery (translations of the Russian words *iurodivy* [юродивый] and *iurodstvo* [юродство]) in general discussion of the phenomenon. I will occasionally use the transliterated forms of these Russian words specially to highlight its contrast the Russian form of the model with the original Greek tradition of *salia*.

<sup>4</sup> Kenosis is in reference to the biblical scripture in Philippians 2:7 where Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men." Jesus's self-emptying process resulted in the temporary loss of his divine gifts such as omnipresence and omnipotence during his time on earth. When said of the average human, kenosis is an emulation of Christ, and his earthly asceticism. <https://thirdmill.org/answers/answer.asp/file/46668>

<sup>5</sup> From Oxford Bibliography entry on Asceticism: "Asceticism may be defined as the voluntary abstention for philosophical or religious reasons from physical goods that are central to the well-being of humankind. The goods are primarily those closely associated with the satisfaction of bodily needs and the survival of the community: food, drink, sexual relations, sleep, and material possessions." <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393361-0110>.

employed to create spiritual and moral revelations in others. The model's standardization and theological justifications were fixed by Bishop Leontius of Neapolis in the vita *The Life of Symeon the Fool*.<sup>6</sup> It is *salos*'s subsequent translation into the Russian context that is of significant importance to the work at hand.

### **Theoretical Background**

Throughout this thesis, I quote many scholars from varying academic backgrounds who all attempt to define the figure of the holy fool and inquire into his specific purpose. However, in order to best approach these models and trace the fool's lived history, there must be a discussion as to his theological inception. In the Bible, the holy fool originates in Corinthians as a radical understanding of Paul's First Epistle. In Corinthians, Paul writes:

For the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.<sup>7</sup>

It was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.<sup>8</sup>

If any man thinketh that he is wise among you in this world, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.<sup>9</sup>

We are fools for Christ's sake.<sup>10</sup>

While many scholars accredit the etymological and theoretical foundations of holy foolery to these specific passages, they also note that this scripture has been widely misunderstood in its application. In their book *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, leading Russian and French theologian George Fedotov quotes a Bollandist scholar to say that a literal reading of Paul's

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<sup>6</sup> Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 1:18-21

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 3:18-20

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor. 4:10

precept “is an aberration and almost sacrilegious interpretation” of scripture.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Russian historian Sergey A. Ivanov highlights this fact by pointing out that Paul knew nothing of the paradigm of holy foolery before writing Corinthians, as it hadn’t existed yet.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, scholars believe that in this precept, Paul is commenting on the general paradox of Christian faith: that belief in the Messiah is inherently foolish from the perspective of the outsider.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Fedotov notes that, in its essence, “*salia* was an attempt at a literal realization of Paul’s precept.”<sup>14</sup>

While much has already been said of the Byzantine tradition of *salia/salos*, this thesis focuses on its Russian counterpart, *iurodstvo*. Considering the relationship between the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, it makes sense that holy foolery has appeared in both contexts. Nevertheless, this specific model of behavior was significantly more revered in Russia. Fedotov asserts that “holy foolishness became in Russia the most popular, and truly national form of ascetic life”<sup>15</sup>. He emphasizes this fact by drastically comparing the number of holy fools canonized by each respective Church.<sup>16</sup> It is in this discrepancy that an interesting and consequential paradox forms. Although there were six times more Russian holy fools than Greek ones, the Russian hagiographic literature of their fools was demonstrably less detailed and

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<sup>11</sup> George Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, (Harvard University Press, 1966), 322.

<sup>12</sup> In his book, Ivanov goes on a long tangent on this subject claiming that all early Christian theologians who commented heavily on these lines of scripture “knew nothing about holy foolery” (from Ivanov 2006, 20). It is Ivanov’s belief that Paul is speaking ironically about pagan wisdom here. Additionally, western theologian Daniel Krueger, an expert on the vitae of Symeon, notes the complicated and awkward relationship between Symeon’s foolishness and these lines of scripture. Krueger takes notice that in *The Life of Symeon the Fool* “Leontius’s conception of the Fool for Christ’s Sake is not particularly Pauline.” And while Leontius utilizes Paul’s precepts in his original text he “does not attempt to recover Paul’s sense of the phrase,” but rather he uses Paul’s words “to establish biblical authority for Symeon’s extraordinary behavior.” (from Krueger, 1996)

<sup>13</sup> George Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, 321

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 322

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 317

<sup>16</sup> In Byzantine history there were only six canonized holy fools. In the case of Russian Church, there were thirty-six canonized just in the period between the 14th-17th centuries. This does not account for those not canonized as well as the cultural relevance that followed the figure.



numerous.<sup>17</sup> This central paradox is what shapes George Fedotov's oft-cited model of *iurodstvo* in his book *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*.

Interestingly, Fedotov uses Greek rather than Russian hagiography to develop his four pillars of holy foolery. He justifies this choice by stating that the "Russian Lives of the holy fools do not reveal to us what we need to know to understand the religious sense of their paradoxical behavior."<sup>18</sup> Considering the influence of this specific work on Russian theology and research on holy foolery, I find this course of action particularly noteworthy. Regardless of this, his model is as follows:

1. Firstly, the holy fool must embody the "ascetic repression of vainglory which is always a great danger for monastic asceticism."<sup>19</sup> In the fool's feigned madness, they are able to provoke vilification from others, which is productive for the suppression of pride but also beneficial for their revelatory capacities.
2. Secondly, the holy fool works in "service to the world in a special mission, not by word or beneficent action but through the power of the Spirit which works through the disguise of madness but is manifested in clairvoyance and prophecy."<sup>20</sup> It is through the fool's kenotic dimension and their inner purity that they have access to these divine powers.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Our sources, the Russian Lives of the canonized "fools" are very inadequate. Their biographies are rare and still rarer are any composed by contemporaries. Furthermore, the latter are appalling in terms of their paleness and commonplace rhetoric."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 318-319.

Adding on to this point, Fedotov also notes that the Russian hagiography lacks the feigned immorality central to the Byzantine fool. It is his contention that for the Russian lives of holy fools "to feign madness is good enough for them" (318). However, Fedotov also make note of the popularity of the Byzantine Saints lives of Symeon and Andrew in Russia. So, in a sense, the justification for using the Byzantine model rather than the Russian one is that his definition of the phenomenon is established from the generally accepted form of *iurodstvo* rather than the formally accepted form of the Church.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 320.

The scholars note here that outside of its ascetic purposes, the fool's mask of madness also works to counterbalance any reverence and adoration the fool might receive thanks to their divine powers. It is under the guise of madness that the fool can act in an immoral manner that subversively maintains both his humility and his ability to pursue the mission of saving men.

3. Thirdly, Fedotov establishes that holy fools live “in cities among men” so that they can “bring asceticism to a radicalism undreamed of by the hermits of the desert.”<sup>21</sup> The author contrasts *salia* with other Orthodox ascetic forms which generally would live isolated in huts and caves. The holy fool is barred from such luxuries and is subjected to the roofless cold city streets. The rejection of shelter is another layer on the standard deprivations in food/sleep etc. in Russian ascetism. Additionally, Fedotov draws a connection here between *salia/iurodstvo* and nakedness (a reoccurring theme seen in this thesis).
4. The scholar's final principle of holy foolery is that this mode of life is inherently paradoxical and “always remains irrational.” It is a “disinterested impetus to madness which claims a religious motivation,” and is “free from all practical and moral considerations.”<sup>22</sup>

Fedotov's principles of holy foolery are both widely used and recognized in international scholarship on the subject. Almost all other scholars referenced in this thesis have been influenced by his works, as is the case with the next relevant scholar to this chapter: Sergey A. Ivanov.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 321.

Sergey Ivanov is a Russian scholar who, in his book *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, approaches the phenomenon from a historical perspective. Ivanov's definition of the fool is notably shorter than that of Fedotov, but contains one central and defining distinction.

Ivanov starts his book by declaring:

'Holy fool' is a term for a person who feigns insanity, pretends to be silly, or who provokes shock or outrage by his deliberate unruliness. However, the term does not apply to all such behavior. Extravagant conduct may qualify as holy foolery only if those who watch it assume that what lies beneath is sanity and high morality, even pious intent. The Orthodox Church holds that the holy fool voluntarily takes upon himself the mask of insanity in order that he may thereby conceal his own perfection from the world and hence avoid the vanity of worldly praise.<sup>23</sup>

When compared to Fedotov's model, there are obvious similarities, such as a focus on feigned insanity, provocation, and a shared repression of vainglory. Many of the finer details established by Fedotov are lost in this general definition,<sup>24</sup> but the historian makes an interesting addition that revolves around the spectator. Ivanov's contention that extravagant conduct can only qualify as belonging to holy foolery if watched by an informed viewer is unique to his model. In a sense, Ivanov creates a relationship that relegates the holy fool to a far more passive role — a role which is chiefly defined by his theatre and performance. Moreover, the question of spectatorship will be critical to the analysis of Russian cinema throughout this work.

Finally, there must be a mention of Ewa Thompson, a scholar of Russian literature and culture. Thompson's contributions to the study of *iurodstvo* primarily focus on the fool's distinguished influence on Russia's literary tradition. In her paper *The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature*, Thompson, like the aforementioned scholars, traces the history of *iurodstvo*

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<sup>23</sup> Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that Ivanov doesn't consider these factors; on the contrary, Ivanov analyzes all hagiographic literature of the subject in painstaking detail. However, the scholar puts less emphasis on a "one-size-fits-all" approach and rather opts for a general definition of the phenomenon.

that stretches back to Byzantine. However, unlike Ivanov and Fedotov, Thompson understands the holy fool to have “played a political role”<sup>25</sup> in Russia’s Muscovite kingdom dating back to Ivan the Terrible. Thompson notes that the infamous Russian tsar had a particular fondness for holy fools, epitomized in his relationship with St. Basil. Notably, Ivan “built a church to honor the same Vasilii who once offered him fresh blood and meat as a symbol of thirstiness.”<sup>26</sup> Considering Ivan’s history of bloody oppression, the tsar’s soft spot regarding people of this spiritual quality is remarkable. Ivan’s respect for holy fools was passed on to his eventual successor, Boris Godunov, who similarly refused “to touch a *iurodivy*” out of respect.<sup>27</sup> In due time, famous Russian author Alexander Pushkin would immortalize the holy fool in Russia’s literary tradition by including the historical holy fool Ivan Zheleznyi Kolpak in his play *Boris Godunov*.

Although the holy fool was accorded a privileged spot in Kievan Rus’s ecclesiastical writing, which can be attributed to the numerous hagiographic Saint’s Lives that detailed several of their stories, Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* signaled a new era for holy fools in Russia’s literary sphere. Holy fool-like characters like the folkloric Ivanushka<sup>28</sup> started growing in relevance. Furthermore, the presence of holy fool-like characters began appearing in the likes of Dostoevsky, Pasternak, Tolstoy, and so on. Thompson writes that these literary figures began appearing in “prose, poetry and drama, from major to minor works there passes a throng of

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<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature* (Canadian Slavonic Papers, 1973), 249.

Thompson also includes an interesting perspective of the fool’s political dimensions, citing that “in the opinion of some historians, [holy fools] constituted a counterpart to the journalistic commentary of today” (Thompson, 249).

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature*, 250

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson describes Ivan-durachok as “an offshoot of the social consciousness which included the holy fool” specifically thanks to his presentation as “always winning, and never commanding contempt” (from Thompson, 256).

characters who are either *iurodivye* or *stranniki*<sup>29</sup> or both; disguised and undisguised.”<sup>30</sup> The dense list of characters includes the likes of Myshkin in *The Idiot*,<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, and Zhivago in *Doctor Zhivago*<sup>32</sup>. Ultimately, this long-established relationship between holy foolery and Russian literature persists up to the current day, exemplified by Eugene Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* winning Russia’s big book and Yasnaya Polyana awards in 2013.

In Fedotov, Ivanov, and Thompson, holy foolery has shown to be a critical function of Russia’s religious, historical, political, and literary spheres spanning from Byzantine to present-day Russia. While much scholarship has existed in these respective realms, the focus of the current paper is the influence of holy foolery and holy fools in Russia’s cinematic tradition.

### **Contemporary Russian Cinema**

This current thesis will engage in textual and visual analysis of several contemporary Russian films dating from 2002 – 2018.<sup>33</sup> The six films I’ve chosen to analyze are: *House of Fools* (2002 dir. Andrei Konchalovsky), *The Island* (2006 dir. Pavel Lungin), *Playing the Victim*

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<sup>29</sup> Thompson includes in her analysis and codification of holy fools the “stranniki” type holy fool. In her words this homeless class of people were the “moral cousins” of the holy fool, a sort of “wanderer for Christ’s sake” (246). These wandering types aren’t so much the focus of this paper, but interesting to nevertheless.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson puts special attention on Dostoevsky and his protagonists in her analysis. Dostoevsky’s characters often share typological similarities in their pursuit of truth balanced with madness, as well as a certain asceticism. Thompson accredits Dostoevsky’s fascination with “holy fool-like” characters due to the model’s connection to the Eleusinian Mysteries. This connection is larger than the scope of this paper, but Thompson’s article provides much in this light. Thompson notes Dostoevsky’s interest in the Eleusinian mysteries and cites them as part of his inspirations. Hence, for this reason, Dostoevsky’s catalogue of characters is stock full of holy fool-like characters.

<sup>32</sup> Continuing on: the holy fool in Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, the God’s folk in *War in Peace*, Sofia in *Crime and Punishment*, Stinking Elizaveta in *Brothers Karamazov*, and so on. Thompson notes that even Gorky had holy fools in his works even though he despised and abused them within his texts.

<sup>33</sup> It would be admis not to mention that depictions of *iurodstvo* and holy-fool-like characters that predated 2002. Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, one of the most influential directors of the 20th century, is recognized for utilizing characters in this mold in several of his films. This connection is outside the scope of the current paper, but more can be found on it in Robert O. Efird’s article *The Holy Fool in Late Tarkovsky*.

(2006 dir. Kirill Serebrennikov), *The Fool* (2014 dir. Yuri Bykov), *No Place for Fools* (2015 dir. Oleg Mavromati), and *The Student* (2016 dir. Kirill Serebrennikov). My focus on these specific films, within this specific time period, is interlinked with the holy fool's established connection with political critique. This thesis will investigate the holy fool as a modern-day political actor that is distinguished by his critique of the social and political institutions of Putin's Russia.

My choice to approach this topic through the lens of film is threefold. Firstly, while there exists significant scholarship of this subject, not much has been written in way of film analysis/critique and theory. My research elucidates the fool's cinematic history beyond a mere mention or footnote. Secondly, the fool's relationship with the filmic camera is distinguished from the fool's other literary modes. Holy foolery, in its essence, is dependent on spectatorship. While various forms of ascetic life exist, much of the holy fool's unique intrigue stems from his relationship with those who perceive, and are changed by, his scandalous acts. Considering this, the spectatorship brought about by the film camera creates an interesting development in the holy fool's narrative tradition. Finally, the sheer number of films with characters in this mold within this time period underscores significance.

As this paper moves beyond the confines of film into the related field of performance protest, holy foolery will be discussed as a useful generative tool in understanding contemporary Russia's political field. The fool's powerful tools of dissent, in their very visible form, are the subject of the current research, and provides potential for continued research in this field.

### **Roadmap & Definition**

This thesis will contain an ongoing discussion of what exactly defines *iurodstvo*/holy foolery. As seen in the aforementioned models, the parameters of this type of behavior are fluid in their specificity and pedagogical background. For the purposes of this thesis, I've crafted an updated definition that best reflects how holy foolery has developed up to this point in time based on my research. My definition states:

In its essence, holy foolery is a model that utilizes insanity, be it feigned or genuine, to encourage and reveal moral/spiritual revelations in a spectator(s). Typically, the holy fool is situated outside of or in conflict with larger structure/systems, and the holy fool's foolishness also contains a reflexive element.

This model of *iurodstvo* is notably less specific than those models developed by Ivanov, Fedotov, and Thompson. However, I consider this vagueness an essential element of the contemporary debate on the subject. As demonstrated later in this thesis, understanding of this model has been shifting and expanding for the past few decades. My definition combines elements of all models covered in this thesis, in an attempt to re-ground the subject of *iurodstvo*. Throughout the course of this thesis, we will frequently return to these definitions and models in order to demonstrate the shifting nature of the concept.

This thesis will start with a discussion of Pavel Lungin's film *The Island* — the second most watched program in the history of Russian television. This film is a natural starting point in our discussion of cinematic holy fools thanks to both its popularity and rather standard portrayal of holy foolery. In the first chapter, I investigate how the holy fool has manifested in an atypical temporal setting. As a feature of antiquity, the holy fool and its models aren't adjusted to contemporary times. This conflict and a study into how Lungin's holy fool deviates from established models of *iurodstvo* as developed by scholars such as George Fedotov, Sergey Ivanov, and Ewa Thompson. Also analyzed in this discussion of *The Island* is the cinematic fool's problematic and decisive relationship with the omnipresent film camera. Inherent in any

cinematic depiction of *iurodstvo* is a certain level of layered spectatorship. The holy fool then operates on two distinguished levels: that being his effect on the intradiegetic audience, as well as the extradiegetic one. These discussions set the framework for the chapters that follow it.

In this thesis's second chapter, I will further illuminate the contemporary holy fool with an analysis of the *blazhenny*-type *iurodivy*. The *blazhenny* type of fool plays a significant role in the Russian context attributed to the fact that most Russian hagiographic literature on holy fools bare more resemblance to blessed idiots (*blazhenny*) than to scandalous pranksters (*salia*) of Byzantine. Teasing out the differences in these types of holy fools is facilitated through a discussion of Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* and Bykov's *The Fool*. Furthermore, this chapter also introduces *iurodstovanie* or "the deliberate attempt to appear as a holy fool" that influences the rest of the present work.

In the thesis's third chapter, I analyze the holy fool as a character defined by its translation through postmodernism. The fool originates from a uniquely pagan form of Orthodox Christianity and is again translated through the medium of postmodernism in the later Soviet period. The holy fool has come to be recognized as an inherently postmodern figure and icon by a range of Soviet philosophers and scholars. In this most recent translation, the holy fool is seemingly stripped of his religious core which just leaves behind the mask of the holy fool. This mask is employed by numerous cinematic characters as well as postmodern performance artists.

This thesis's final chapter offers an exploration of Russia's political performance scene, specifically looking at Peter Pavlensky, Pussy Riot, and Oleg Mavromatti. Mavromatti's experimental film *No Place for Fools* is the greatest realization of the marriage of holy foolery and contemporary Russian protest culture. The film's holy fool, Sergey Astahov, a mythical reality and subversive figure, is mobilized by the director as his mask in drawing a critical



picture of Russian society. It is an analysis of the subversive reality-bending figure of Astahov, and this radical invocation of *iurodstvo* that comprises the bulk of the final chapter.

## CHAPTER ONE: A CONTEMPORARY MODEL

Pavel Lungin's 2006 film *The Island* (*Ocmpos*) is a spiritual parable of a man's sin, faith, and repentance that utilizes the phenomenon of holy foolery to tell its story. However, *The Island* isn't the director's first time depicting a *iurodivy* as a cinematic character. In his 1990 film *Taxi Blues*, the holy fool is found in the character Lyosha, a non-conformist jazz musician played by Petr Mamonov (the same actor who plays the role of Father Anatoly in *The Island*). Similarly in 2009, Lungin once again recreates the holy fool in his film *Tsar*, a historical drama that retells the story of one of Ivan the Terrible's oppressive episodes and his tenuous relationship with Metropolitan Philip of Moscow. However, it is the dreamy Tarkovsky-like narrative of *The Island* that captured the attention of millions of viewers across the world. The film was so successful that upon its release on Christmas day in 2006, the film recorded "the highest viewing rates on Russian television. . . second only to Putin's New Year's speech."<sup>34</sup>

This following chapter provides a new reading of Lungin's film, with a special emphasis on the film's holy fool, Father Anatoly. Through tracing Anatoly's historical prototypes, and analyzing the character's role and interactions in the film, this chapter will demonstrate the political nature of the fool and inquire into this film's relationship with the post-Soviet era.

### *The Plot*

*The Island* tells the story of Father Anatoly, a disgraced and mournful veteran of WWII who now spends his life on a monastery island after washing ashore unconscious twenty years earlier. The film's story starts with the younger Anatoly, a Soviet naval stoker on a coal barge in

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<sup>34</sup> Bodin, "The Holy Fool as a TV Hero: About Pavel Lungin's Film 'The Island' and the Problem of Authenticity" *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, no.3 (2011), 1.

1942. Accompanying Anatoly on the barge is the captain, Tikhon. While sailing, the two men are stopped and boarded by the crew of a hostile Nazi ship. After boarding the coal barge, a German commander finds Anatoly's hiding spot among the ship's many piles of coal. A scared and tearful Anatoly eventually complies with their orders and reveals the hiding place of his captain Tikhon. It is here that the commander offers Anatoly a fateful choice – to shoot Tikhon in exchange for his own life, or to die alongside him. Although he initially resists, Anatoly's fear of death leads him to shoot the scornful Tikhon, sending the captain overboard.

This critical decision defines Anatoly's journey throughout the rest of the film as he deals with the spiritual consequences of his actions. After shooting Tikhon, the Nazi soldiers leave the weeping Anatoly aboard the coal barge. A bomb is also planted on the barge, which explodes shortly thereafter. The explosion launches Anatoly's body into the ocean, whose fateful waves carry him to a small, isolated monastery community.

After this opening scene, there is a significant skip in time to the film's modern day in 1976. The rest of the film focuses on Anatoly's repentance, and his relationship with the other monks who live in the monastic commune. Interestingly, Anatoly has refused the monk's habit, and instead occupies a dynamic and unofficial role on the island community. Anatoly – now referred to as Father Anatoly – works in the island's boiler room as a stoker. He spends most of his days either praying or retrieving coal from what appears to be his old washed-up barge that was destroyed during the war. This coal that Anatoly spends all day shoveling, whose soot covers the man from head to toe and even constitutes the bed he sleeps on, is a constant reminder of Anatoly's grave sin.

However, Anatoly also has a significant spiritual function on the island for both its residents and the outsiders who visit. Throughout the film, Soviet citizens visit the monastic

commune to see the holy man that lives there. That holy man ends up being Father Anatoly – a born again *iurodivy*, or traditional holy fool. Outside of his laborious task of stoking the fire, Anatoly regularly receives guests who come in search of spiritual guidance and for his powers of clairvoyance and healing. Interestingly, these visitors are unaware that Anatoly is the sacred man they are in search of. And indeed, he deliberately hides this fact from many of them. In these meetings, Anatoly convinces a woman not to get an abortion, helps an older woman find solace with her supposedly dead husband, heals a young boy's deformed leg and hip, and even performs an exorcism.

Due to Anatoly's heightened popularity and unconventional ways, many of the island's monks take issue with his strange practices. Chief among them is Father Job, a prideful and envious monk who has a particularly testy relationship with Father Anatoly. While most of the island's monks disdain the holy fool, Anatoly grabs the attention of the island's head monk, Father Superior Filaret. Unlike the others, Filaret is intrigued by Anatoly's actions and strange ways. After Filaret's residence is burnt down - something prophesized by Anatoly - Father Superior insists on visiting and staying with Anatoly in the furnace room. In one of the film's climactic episodes, Anatoly exposes Filaret's pride and greed by burning the head monk's fancy boots and throwing his expensive bedding into the ocean. More importantly, in this exchange Anatoly exposes the Father Superior's fear of death. This fear of death is a particularly damning sin, and one that Anatoly is himself cursed with. After the chaotic visit, the two men share a sincere exchange, and it is during this conversation that Anatoly's genuine self is revealed. Here, our protagonist is stripped of his mask of feigned madness as he reflects on the sin that so heavily weighs on his conscience.

The film's third act is focused on Anatoly's dwindling health and his ensuing death. Anatoly's final divine act, the exorcism of the possessed daughter of a Soviet admiral, propels this final third of the film. Anatoly seems uniquely connected to this girl; the two even speak in a similar singsong and animal-like language. After getting the permission of her father, Anatoly takes the girl to his private island, a space he usually reserves to pray for his and Tikhon's souls. Father Anatoly painfully exorcises the demons out of the girl, after which she is returned to a normal state. This exorcism also purges a lingering demon that has resided within Anatoly. After the exorcism, it is revealed that the girl's father is the same man that Anatoly believed he had killed many years ago. Surprisingly, Tikhon has survived the bullet wound, believing that it was Anatoly instead who perished that night. The confession and reunion of the two men allows Anatoly to be freed from the sin that has haunted him all his life. With this sin absolved, Anatoly can finally die. *The Island* ends with Father Anatoly proclaiming his impending death, sharing a few moments with Father Job, and dying peacefully in his familiar coal-room. His corpse is brought to his personal island by Father Job, and it is there that the holy fool is buried.

### **Fathers Feofil and Sebastion of Karaganda**

On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Director Pavel Lungin and Screenwriter Dmitri Sobolev were part of an online conference in which the two men discussed their film and answered questions about its creation.<sup>35</sup> Though this conference contains in it a number of fascinating details, an exchange between Sobolev and a Ukrainian reviewer stands out. Sergey Golokha points out that “не менее половины диалогов из Вашего сценария были полностью позаимствованы из жизнеописания преподобного Феофила Киевского [no less than half of the dialogues from

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<sup>35</sup> Sobolev, “*The Island*, Film-event, Film-sermon”, Russian Orthodox Church, 2006, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/164751.html>.

your script were completely borrowed from the biography of St. Feofil of Kiev].”<sup>36</sup> The screenwriter in response states:

Так как я человек не воцерковленный, поэтому не очень знаю монастырскую жизнь. Я читал жития многих подвижников, и в основу образов главного героя легли Феофил Печерский и Севастиан Карагандинский. А что касается указаний, в книге издательства «Амфора», в которой напечатан сценарий, есть сноски на то, что прототипами главного героя были эти старцы.

Since I am not a church person, I don't know much about monastic life. I read the Saints Lives of many ascetics, and the basis of the image for the main character was derived from Feofil Pechersky and Sevastian of Karaganda. As far as the references, in the book of the Amphora publishing house, which printed the script, there are footnotes that the prototype of the main character were these elders.<sup>37</sup>

There are two things of note from this exchange. Firstly, the screenwriter of *The Island* firmly establishes that he is not a “church person,” a claim that is later echoed by the director Pavel Lungin in this same conference. For Lungin, a self-described “believer” but not “church person,” this film “не церковное же произведение — художественное [is not a church work – rather an artwork].”<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note the contrast between such an overtly seeming Orthodox work and its lay creators, a contradiction that will be further discussed below. Secondly, the invocation of the Saints Lives of Feofil and Sebastian of Karaganda offers a key to understanding the film. It is with these texts in mind, that I will compare these respective narratives, and analyze the artistic choices made by Lungin and Sobolev.

In an interview with rg.ru, Sobolev answers as to why he specifically chose the Saint Lives of Feofil and Sebastian of Karaganda. The screenwriter explains that he had been interested in monastic life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and wanted to utilize prototypical stories to preserve a sense of reality. The story of Elder Sebastian describes “одного из оптинских

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<sup>36</sup> Sobolev, “*Patriarchia Interview*”, 2006

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Lungin, “Interview with the Creator of the Film *The Island*”, Orthodoxy.ru, 2006 <https://pravoslavie.ru/4994.html>

старцев, после разгрома Оптиной пустыни попавшим в карагандинские лагеря [one of the elders of Optina Pustyn Monastery, who, after the destruction of the monastery, ended up in the Karaganda prison camps].” After being freed Sebastion stayed “в Караганде и остался, организовал молеальный дом [In Karaganda he stayed and organized a prayer house].”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, when asked if Elder Sebastion played the fool similarly to Anatoly, Sobolev responded “нет, это Феофил Печерский юродствовал [no, it was Feofil of the Kievan Caves who played the fool].” Hence it was Sebastion’s life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Feofil’s foolishness that together create the character of Father Anatoly. However, an inquiry into these Saint Lives reveals more striking similarities between them and *The Island*.

Saint Feofil of the Kievan caves was born in 1788 under the name of Foma to a provincial family near Kiev.<sup>40</sup> From birth Foma displayed signs of being blessed by God, epitomized by a tumultuous episode between the child and his mother. As a baby, Foma refused his mother’s milk and was generally distant from her. His mother, Evfrosiniya, soon became convinced that the baby was possessed, and called upon her servant to murder the child. Although disheartened, the servant took the baby Foma to the river where the following episode ensued:

Making the sign of the cross, she dropped Foma in the water. She was not prepared for what would happen next. Foma came up to the surface of the water, floated peacefully to the opposite bank and was cast onto dry land. God had clearly saved the child from drowning. She couldn’t believe what she had just witnessed and quickly crossed the river, picking Foma up in her arms. The child was sound asleep. Fearing the wrath of Evfrosiniya, she decided to quickly put an end to the task at hand and without thinking; she threw Foma in the river again. Again, she witnessed God’s providence in the life of

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<sup>39</sup> Sobolev & Yakovleva, “The Main Thing for Me in *The Island* and in Life is Repentance”, RGRU, 2007, <https://rg.ru/2007/02/28/sobolev.html>

<sup>40</sup> Valadez, “Saint Feofil of the Kievan Caves”, Orthodox Christianity Then and Now, 2017, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2017/10/saint-feofil-of-kiev-caves-fool-for.html>

Foma as the waves carried the child to a small island in the river and cast him, once more, onto dry land.

After the miracle, the servant returned to Eforsiniya with the baby and vehemently refused to kill the child. The enraged mother took the baby in her own arms and returned to the river. There, the mother found a mill near the river and threw the baby under the wheel, hoping to crush him. However, God intervened one final time and stopped the millstone. The baby Foma was found floating in a whirlpool caused by the rushing water and was then saved by the distraught miller.

Foma, although an excellent student, would opt to enter Monastic life rather than pursue a formal education in 1812. In 1821, he was tonsured and received the new name of Feodorit. By 1827, Feodorit would be elevated in rank, reaching the position of Hieromonk of the Bratsky Monastery. It was after being denied the request to leave the monastery in order to pursue greater asceticism in the Kievan caves that Feodorit first became “a fool for Christ's sake.” After once again being tonsured in 1834, he was renamed Feofil.<sup>41</sup> Feofil’s holy foolery is distinct from the likes of the Byzantine Symeon of Emesa as he adopts a foolishness in the model of Russian Orthodoxy. This same distinction was recognized by George Fedotov and was critical in the development of his model of foolishness. Fedotov notes that the chief distinction between the Russian and Byzantine Saint Lives of holy fools was the presence/absence of a feigned immorality.<sup>42</sup> While both figures share an extreme asceticism and feigned insanity, Byzantine fools like Symeon utilized malicious pranks and actions in service of their spiritual quests. A feigned immorality is intended to provoke vilification and abuse from the fools’ followers and spectators and served to further repress the fool’s vainglory. This element is completely lacking in Feofil’s Saint Life. While it is true that Feofil was accosted by his brethren monks for his

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<sup>41</sup> Valadez, “Saint Feofil”, 2017

<sup>42</sup> Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, 318-319



unusual behavior, this vilification is less of what he did to others and more how he conducted himself. The Saint was known for never buttoning his robe, being covered in filth, frantically running in and out of church and praying loudly, never reading scripture audibly when it was his turn to read Psalm in church, kneeling on tree stumps, and much more.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Feofil lived in a messy and disheveled room, which he claimed was a “way in order to remind himself of the disorder of his soul.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense Feofil’s foolishness is far more reflexive, and self-contained. However, Feofil still had his fair share of miracles, notably those of clairvoyance and prophecy.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the fool for Christ's sake passed away peacefully in his cell in the fall of 1853 after having foretold his death in a similar manner to Anatoly in *The Island*.

The Saint’s Life of Feofil sheds much light on the story of Father Anatoly in *The Island*. While screenwriter Dmitri Sobolev credits Anatoly’s foolishness to the life of Feofil, even using several dialogues as the basis of Anatoly’s interactions with Job and Filaret, the two men operate differently in the realms of their foolishness. Primarily, Anatoly acts according to the formative qualities of *salos* rather than Feofil’s Russian model of *iurodstvo*. Anatoly does feign immorality throughout his interactions with the visitors to the island, as well as his brethren. He is shown to intentionally offend Father Iov, curse and chase his visitors out, and even almost suffocate Father Filaret. Interestingly, Anatoly’s feigned immorality is significantly less scandalous and harmful when compared to the likes of St. Symeon, but it is still a vital part of the character and his relationships. In this way, Anatoly almost occupies an intermediary position between the radical *salia* and the conservative *iurodstvo*.

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<sup>43</sup> “Saint Feofil: Fool for Christ”, Joy of All Who Sorrow Orthodox Church, 2018, [https://joyofallwhosorrow-indy.org/news\\_220105\\_2](https://joyofallwhosorrow-indy.org/news_220105_2)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Feofil is also known for miracles that were often outside the realms of traditional holy foolery/kenosis. In one episode he tamed a wild and ferocious bull and in another he made a meal for pilgrims out of rocks and grass.

Continuing with this comparison, both Anatoly and Feofil are saved through divine intervention by means of water. Anatoly, like the baby Foma, is thrust into water which carries his body to safe ground. Although, in the case of Saint Feofil, this divine intervention is given more significance, both figures share an fateful relationship with water. In *The Island*, water underpins the film's entire aesthetic. Lungin's pensive shots of the water and waves that surround the island are almost Tarkovsky-like in their number and focus. The aesthetic of water is inescapable within the film, save for a few scenes inside Anatoly's boiler room. While the reference to the Saint's Life of Feofil is clear, in *The Island*, water carries additional metaphorical significance which will be analyzed in greater detail below.

Anatoly's other saintly prototype, Sevastian of Karaganda, doesn't appear to share much with Anatoly besides both being situated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elder Sevastian was born in 1884, but unlike Feofil, he wasn't blessed with a miraculous or blessed youth. Sevastian's family had noted ties to monastic life, and like both of his older brothers he joined the Optina Pustyn monastery in early 1909. In 1918 the monastery was formally closed but continued to exist, disguised as an agricultural artel.<sup>46</sup> In 1923, after the Red Army's victory in the Russian civil war, all monastic services were stopped, with authorities even evicting several of the monks. However, Sevastian refused to give up monastic life and later found the Illynsky Church in which he resided from 1928 to 1933.<sup>47</sup> In 1933 Sevastian was arrested by the Soviet government, and while being interrogated, the future Saint said this of the Soviet state: "На все мероприятия советской власти я смотрю как на гнев Божий, и эта власть есть наказание для людей [I see

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<sup>46</sup> "Venerable Confessor Sevastian of Karaganda", Azbyka, [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sevastian\\_Karagandinskij/](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sevastian_Karagandinskij/)

<sup>47</sup> It is also interesting to note that Sevastian was actively engaged in fighting the Soviets during this time while at Illynsky.

in all events of Soviet power the wrath of God, and this government is a punishment for people].”<sup>48</sup>

Sevastian’s anti-Soviet activities are numerous and accounted for, and the priest served a seven year long sentence in the Karaganda labor camps Karlag in Kazakhstan. During his sentence, Sevastian began to nurture a religious community within the camp. After being released, the elder built a small church in the village of Bolshaya Mikhailovka. Throughout the late 40s and 50s, many priests arrived and joined the commune. Although the authorities attempted to close Sevastian’s church, they were unsuccessful<sup>49</sup> and in 1953 the commune even received permission and registration from the state. In his final years Sevastian would be tonsured and would peacefully pass away on April 19, 1966. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Sevastian was venerated as a local Saint by new Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in Karaganda in 1997.

Since the story of Father Anatoly doesn’t share many similarities with the life of Sevastian of Karaganda, it is particularly fascinating then that Sobolev distinctly notes this character and his influence on the script of *The Island*.<sup>50</sup> While both figures “lived” during the 1900s, the way they engaged with that period are completely different. In many ways, Elder Sevastian’s reverence is defined by his constant conflict with Soviet power and values. His actions, specifically setting up a local church commune, were against the wishes of the Soviet

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<sup>48</sup> “Sevastian of Karaganda”, Azbyka, [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sevastian\\_Karagandinskij/](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sevastian_Karagandinskij/)

<sup>49</sup> A quote from the text (Ibid): The authorities, seeing his authority, did their best to close the temple, but they did not succeed: the priest, as soon as they called him, disarmed them so that they were completely deprived of the gift of speech and after his departure they were surprised: “What kind of old man is this, what are we can't we do anything?” This is one of the only notable miracles performed by the Saint which stood in interesting juxtaposition to the rest of his Saint Life.

<sup>50</sup> In the rg.ru interview Sobolev makes mention that Sebastion (not the real one but someone playing him) almost made it into the film, and existed in earlier versions of the script. Sobolev & Yakovleva, “The Main Thing for Me”, 2007

Union. Simply put, he was arrested for being faithful to his faith. On the other hand, Anatoly doesn't speak much of the USSR, though he was part of the Soviet Navy during his youth. The film, like its directors, dances around the subject of *The Island's* setting between the years 1942 and 1976. But, to what extent is a critique of the Soviet period woven into *The Island*? The Orthodox Church and Soviet power were long in conflict, and while film works hard to *present* itself as apolitical, it does share with Sebastian of Karaganda several subversive elements of political critique against the Soviet way of life. This mostly appears in scenes where Anatoly receives visitors from the secular world, discussed in greater detail below.

### **Behind the Mask: Anatoly's Foolishness**

We now turn to an analysis of Father's Anatoly's unique type of holy foolery with a special focus on the role of the omniscient camera in its construction. Though there are many scenes in which Anatoly is shown acting according to the formal qualities of the holy fool, one scene in particular stands out above the rest. After Father Filaret's residence is burned down, he decides to lodge in the coal room with Anatoly. The Father Superior brings his luxurious red and gold mattress to the boiler room and proclaims that he understands the devastating fire as "a sign to become a hermit."<sup>51</sup> Filaret is testing Anatoly in this scene, as the Father Superior is checking if Anatoly's prediction of the fire was real clairvoyance, or a coincidence brought forward by a madman. When Filaret asks Anatoly what he thinks about the ordeal, Anatoly responds with "I'm not a learned man, I don't think anything."<sup>52</sup> In his response Anatoly doesn't react pridefully, and essentially denies any claim to higher knowledge or truths. Anatoly frequently

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<sup>51</sup> Lungin, *The Island*, 1:04:37

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 1:04:44

dismisses any privy access to higher knowledge, even though he is shown to possess such insight. Anatoly's refusal to take acknowledgment for his clairvoyant musings is also shown in two other earlier scenes, specifically that of the visiting pregnant girl and the visiting tortured widow. This strategy is in accordance with Anatoly's other efforts to conceal his own perfection from the world and avoid the vanity of worldly praise (one of the essential pillars of Orthodox spirituality and holy foolery). It is here that Father Filaret exclaims his intent to lodge with Anatoly and the two spend the day together.

Anatoly demonstrates his revelatory capabilities later that night, long after the Father Superior has fallen asleep. As discussed in the introduction, the holy fool would traditionally employ tricks and pranks on others in order to bring about moral and spiritual realizations in those he targets. In this case, Filaret is targeted for his greedy tendencies, exemplified by his boots and blankets: the physical embodiments of his sin. After Filaret wakes up in the middle of the night, he is greeted by Anatoly crouching near the fireplace, holding his patriarch-gifted boots. While looking at these boots, Anatoly cryptically tells Filaret that he is "reading the book of human sins" before tossing the pair into the fireplace. A stunned Filaret quietly stares at Anatoly, who continues by stating that "most sins nest in bishop's boot tops."<sup>53</sup> Filaret, finally coming to his senses, curses Anatoly, and stands up to leave the room. However, Anatoly has previously locked the exit, and has more planned for the Father Superior. The camera turns back to reveal Anatoly has closed the firepit's air vent, essentially turning the coal room into a smoke chamber. Anatoly, growing increasingly excited, proclaims that he is going to "smoke [the demons] out" of the room. While Anatoly climbs the furnaces in search of hiding demons, a frantic and confused Filaret begins choking on the smoke. The scared Filaret even tries fighting

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 1:09:19

Anatoly to get him to stop the smoke, all which Anatoly dismisses. The holy fool eventually considers the demon-purging job to be finished and opens the locked door, but quickly runs back inside the room to grab what he calls the “the chief demon.”<sup>54</sup> Grabbing the Father Superior’s ordained mattress, Anatoly wrestles it before throwing it into the ocean. This strange and provocative episode is all witnessed by Father Filaret, who mournfully sits down on a bench nearby.

Following the dramatic smoke scene, the two holy men sit together in brief silence and thought. Although Anatoly has just been full of chaotic energy, he is now shown to be sad, almost as disgusted with himself as Filaret. Filaret responds to Anatoly with the following monologue:

I bear you no grudge, brother. I am grateful to you, brother. I really am. You've delivered me from things superficial and unnecessary. I was really attached to those boots and that blanket, and you removed them from me. Thank you. And you've shown me there's little faith in me. I got really scared. I'm going to meet death in his stokehole, I thought. I feared death because I had little faith. It means I am not ready to meet Our Lord. I was afraid to face death unrepented. There's little virtue in me but much sin.<sup>55</sup>

This moment is incredibly important for several reasons. Firstly, this quote demonstrates Filaret’s moment of realization. Anatoly’s scandalous pranks has brought about Filaret’s self-reflection and though the prank the Father Superior recognizes his own sins. The holy fool, if diluted down to a simple transactional process, is represented here. However, the other interesting aspect of this moment is Anatoly’s candid nature, which is almost never seen in the film. While talking with Filaret, Anatoly says that his “virtues stink before the lord,” and that he “should be hanged”<sup>56</sup> for his sins. The holy man even ponders why God chose him to “lead the

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<sup>54</sup> Lungin, *The Island*, 1:11:29

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 1:12:50-1:14:01

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1:14:30

community”<sup>57</sup> and why God blessed him with such miracles and insight. Interestingly, Father Filaret and Father Anatoly are both shown to be cursed with the same sin, a fear of death. It was this sin that led Anatoly to originally shoot his captain Tikhon, which subsequently led to Anatoly’s journey for repentance. This shared moment also serves as a reminder to Anatoly of his troubled soul. In this strange openness Anatoly isn’t feigning any madness and talks truthfully about his spiritual troubles. Here the fool’s mask is ripped away, and in the place of madness stands a fully coherent and vulnerable sinner.

While the episode between Filaret and Anatoly is unique in its depiction of the holy fool removing his mask of his own will, it isn’t the only moment in the film where Anatoly’s disguise is lifted. Due to the omniscience of the filmic camera, the film’s viewer is privy to several of Anatoly’s most private moments. An example of this is the scene at 1:03, where Anatoly is left alone at church after everyone had left to tend to the fire at Father Filaret’s residence. Before everyone had left, Anatoly was facing the incorrect direction while praying, and was even physically corrected by Father Iov twice. Anatoly, at this moment, was facing towards the burning building, and was demonstrating his clairvoyance of the matter. After everyone had left the church, Anatoly takes a private moment, ensures that the door is locked behind him, and briefly bows and crosses himself while facing the right direction. The question of the holy fool’s spectatorship has been mutated by the intrusion of the film camera, and the inversion of the cinematic diegesis.

The holy fool in many aspects is defined by his relationship with the spectator. In order to preserve the purity of his own soul, the fool employs feigned madness to deliver his messages

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 1:14:35

and at the same time be vilified for his silly and scandalous activities. Hence, Anatoly's role as the protagonist in a narrative is a novel concept with several ramifications. As Alina Birzache states in her book *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, "Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov/The Island* . . . is generally considered to be the first feature film to elaborate on the spiritual model of the hagiographic holy fool to such an extent that it becomes the central concern of the film."<sup>58</sup> In this formulation, the question of spectatorship operates on two layers: the filmic characters who perceive the fool within the events of the film, and the film's viewers whose gaze appropriates that of the omniscient camera. Birzache acknowledges the novelty of this concept, noting that in *The Island* the holy fool is "no longer subordinate to the narrative but is explored as a protagonist in his own right."<sup>59</sup> In this new formulation, the holy fool "provokes the film audience probably as much as he provokes his surroundings"<sup>60</sup> and Birzache even concludes that "the provocative potential, mixed with the social criticism and ambiguity" of the holy fool is what makes him "so popular in Russia of today."<sup>61</sup>

While Birzache sees this development as an exciting feature for the future of holy foolery, this new layered spectatorship creates a deeply complex figure, one that is multifunctional and fragmented in its presentation. In a general sense, the holy fool has traditionally been presented without perspective. Ivanov's model emphasizes the spectator above the fool – essentially the fool's generative capacity stems from its stance as a subject whose value comes from being observed. The holy fool creates meaning through revelation in others, and an inquiry into the fool's character defeats his traditional role. Lungin's choice to present the fool in a subjective perspective strips the fool of his mask for viewer of the film. While the

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<sup>58</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 58.

<sup>59</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, 61

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 8



spectators of the fool within the film maintain the traditional spectatorship, the film's viewer is allowed to see the fool in his entirety. The question of layered spectatorship will be a prevailing theme in this thesis and will be further explored in the following chapters.

### **A Soviet Counterculture: Repentance and Purgatory**

*The Island's* setting in the mid to late 1900s has confused viewers and scholars since its release in 2006. As Pere-Arne Bodin asks: "How could Father Anatolij have existed at all under the isolation of the church during the Brezhnev-time?"<sup>62</sup> It is a valid question, and the film's director and screenwriter generally demurred when asked about it. This attitude is best exemplified in Dmitri Sobolev's interview with rg.ru, in which the screenwriter asserts "cinema and life are completely different things. . . the laws are somewhat different than in real life."<sup>63</sup> This triumph of artistic truth over historical accuracy is a captivating argument, but the film's two opposing institutions – the Orthodox Church and Soviet power – come into too much conflict for this "artistic truth" to be a narrative afterthought.

First there's *The Island's* relationship with one of the most defining Soviet moments – World War II. Considering the film starts in 1942, *The Island* doesn't dwell much on the importance the war has in the Russian collective consciousness. Themes of patriotism during

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<sup>62</sup> Bodin, "The Holy Fool as a TV Hero", 2

Russian postmodernist thinker Mark Lipovetsky has his answer as to the temporality of *The Island*. In a review he published in 2006, Lipovetsky states the following: "In the secular context, however, this dictum brings us back to the Soviet era with its imposed asceticism and guilt-ridden consciousness. Maybe this is the reason that the film's plotline, which has no real connections with historical reality and could be played out in the setting of any century, is situated in 1974 in the midst of the Stagnation period, which is now perceived by many as a paradise lost?" (Lipovetsky 2006, 4). I strongly disagree with this claim but want to include this perspective as a possible solution. In my opinion the temporal setting of the film purposefully creates a space that historically speaking "could not exist." While the stagnation era probably has some influence in deciding the year in which the filmic events happen, I think the film is purposefully crafted to be in the Soviet era. Later in the chapter I break this concept down further.

<sup>63</sup> Sobolev & Yakovleva, "The Main Thing for Me", 2007

WWII “which otherwise are so important in the Russian context” are notably missing.<sup>64</sup> Also absent is any dialogue of Anatoly’s “desertion during the war,” but rather “his personal sense of guilt and his pangs of conscience because he killed a man.”<sup>65</sup> This de-emphasis on the Soviet past is what Bodin claims is a “provocation against all forms of nationalism”<sup>66</sup> that continues until today.

When the film does present the war in 1942, it associates the Soviet past with an abundantly dark symbol: that of the stoker’s fire. When the film first flashes back to the war, its opening scene depicts Anatoly’s fire pit on the coal barge. Our protagonist is shown in the ship’s hull, shoveling coal as he will for the rest of the film. Interestingly, this entire flashback segment is shot in a cool black and white filter, and the red fire provides some of the only color seen here. The only other strong color in this sequence is that of the bright red Nazi flag in the following shot. Of course, fire has a natural association with hell; abundantly so that the film even references the connection.<sup>67</sup> The aesthetics of the coal boat are dark and ominous, and the film’s black and white filter in this segment contrasts the rest of the film’s bright whites and cold blues. The fire and the remains of the coal barge are the only images the film presents to the viewer of the Soviet Past. In this way, as Russian literary critic Marietta Chudakova notes in her analysis of the film, “прошлое — это война. . . предъявляются только и исключительно ценности военного времени [the past - is war. . . only presented are exclusively war-time values].”<sup>68</sup> In the view of the film, the war isn’t a glorious time of Soviet triumph; the war is the sinful past – a hell

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<sup>64</sup> Bodin, *The Holy Fool as a TV Hero*, 2

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In the first interaction shown between Father Anatoly and Father Job, Job tries and convince Anatoly to move out of the furnace room. When Anatoly asks who is to replace him, Job responds with “brother Nicodimus.” Anatoly then points out that Nicodimus fears fear to which Job fatefully responds: “we all dread Gehenna” (Ibid, 29:08).

<sup>68</sup> “Pavel Lungin’s Film *The Island Brought up the Themes that Concern Everyone*”, *The New Times*, 2007, <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/3495/>

incarnate. The complete arc of Anatoly's spiritual repentance is then the journey from this singular and hellish past to his deliverance in the heavenly afterlife.

In between Anatoly's sinful past and his heavenly future is the liminal space of the island. In a metaphorical sense the monastery, the central setting of the film, operates as a form of purgatory. Spatially, this monastic commune that could not even exist during the Soviet Union is situated as a dreamlike and isolated system. The space itself is surreal and liminal in its presentation. This dreamlike and mystical quality stretches across every aspect of the island as even Anatoly's original arrival on the island suggests a form of divine intervention. While this divine intervention could simply be God carrying Anatoly's body to the monastery, the film could also be inadvertently hinting at Anatoly's death after the explosion on the barge leading to the bulk of the film being set in a form of afterlife. In a way it is more believable that Anatoly passed away from the explosion and the deathly cold waters, than to have survived. The idea of transportation to and from the island is similarly not very developed. The inhabitants of the monastery are never shown to travel away from it, save for Anatoly's infrequent trips to a bordering barren island. In this sense, the film "traps" these figures on the liminal space, with infrequent and unexplained visitors. Finally, the film's focus on the surrounding waters also develops the film's liminal aesthetic. Besides its physical characteristics, the island also operates as purgatory in a functional sense.<sup>69</sup>

Analyzing Anatoly's plight throughout the film also suggests that the monastery serves as a metaphorical purgatory. Notably the protagonist has refused the monk's habit, and instead of assuming other roles, he has spent the past 30 years concerned with the Sisyphean task of stoking

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<sup>69</sup> While the concept of purgatory doesn't exist in Eastern Orthodoxy, this isn't a completely literal reading of the film. Instead, this symbolic purgatory represents the formal, aesthetic, and thematic purposes of purgatory within the spiritual process.

the island's fire. This fire is a constant reminder of Anatoly's murder of Tikhon. Here mixed with the holy fool's ascetic qualities is a hyper-focus on the character's sin. This chapter of the character's life is focused on his repentance in the eyes of God, and Anatoly seemingly makes references to the trapped nature of his soul. In one of his visits to his private island, Anatoly pleads to God and the supposed soul of Tikhon. Here Anatoly begs, "Tikhon can you hear me, I suffer torments, I can't live, and I can't die," and "I've been carrying this sin for years, it never releases me even for one second." Anatoly's reference here is almost tongue-in-cheek, as he references his state as being in between life and death.<sup>70</sup> It is after this prayer that Tikhon magically appears in the film, set on a journey to reunite the two characters and free Anatoly's trapped soul.

Similarly to Anatoly, the other inhabitants of this purgatory, such as Fathers Iov and Filaret, are also sinful individuals. Iov's and Filaret's respective pride blinds them to their deeper spiritual flaws. Filaret as discussed above is blind to his sins, chiefly his greed and his fear of death. Father Iov is cursed by his sinful envy, something he is constantly reminded of by Father Anatoly. In their first on-screen interaction, Anatoly pretends to forget the Bible verse and provokingly asks Iov as to why Cain killed his brother Abel.<sup>71</sup> This motif is carried throughout the film, up to the two characters' final interaction. If the monastery island is to be understood as a purgatory for Anatoly, it is also entirely possible that Iov and Filaret are also stuck in this liminal purgatory, needing to work through their sins in order to reach a spiritual deliverance and afterlife.

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<sup>70</sup> Not the only mention of Anatoly being trapped, in a dialogue with Filaret, Anatoly says "there is no peace in my heart" (Lungin, 1:14:52). In this sense he is like a ghost who can't move on to the next life because of their unfinished business.

<sup>71</sup> That reason being Cain's jealousy over his brother as God rejected his sacrifice and accepted Abel's.

Outside of its aesthetics and characters, Lungin employs several cinematic techniques in order to express the purgatory-like nature of the island. Anatoly is washed ashore on the beach of the monastic island. Several of the monks come rushing to his aid, and then carry his lifeless body from the beach. It is here at 11:02 that the camera fades to a blinding white, followed by a time skip to the film's present day. This isn't the only time Lungin employs this cinematic technique. Interestingly, in a scene after Anatoly has passed away, Job is shown to be escorting his coffin to the burial site. As Iov sails away from the monastery, Lungin once again utilizes the bright fade-out, which then cuts to the film's credits. This cinematic device is only used in these two scenes: Anatoly's arrival on the island and his final departure. In the first instance the bright fade away not only signifies a jump in time, it also essentially separates two worlds. The film's first world, that of hellish war, is replaced by the dream-like monastery. The second instance also distinguishes two "worlds," this time that of the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. Ultimately this middle section, positioned between hell and heaven, symbolizes a form of purgatory.

Ultimately, *The Island* tells the simple story of one man's repentance for his sins. Depicting the story of repentance, and specifically the process of "a soul waking up in a man," is why Lungin makes film.<sup>72</sup> In the case of *The Island*, scholars see a more dynamic form of repentance compared to his earlier works. Alina Birzache conceives the films as Lungin's "response to a new chapter in post-Soviet Russia's ongoing search for identity."<sup>73</sup> Specifically, she claims that Lungin "utilizes the national emblem of the holy fool in such a fashion that he

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<sup>72</sup> In the interview with pravoslavia.ru Lungin writes: Все мои работы о том, как просыпается душа в человеке. И таксист в «Такси-блюзе», и мальчик-антисемит в «Луна парке» проходят через мучительное, тяжелое, часто неприятное для человека открытие, ощущение в себе духовной сущности. [All my works are about how the soul wakes up in a person. Both the taxi driver in "Taxi Blues" and the anti-semitic boy in "Luna Park" go through a painful, difficult, often unpleasant discovery for a person, a feeling of spiritual essence in himself.] Lungin, "Interview with the Creator", 2006

<sup>73</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, 58

projects the image of a new spiritual guide for the post-Soviet era.”<sup>74</sup> In this way, Anatoly’s provocations and spiritual guidance in his capacity as a holy fool is as applicable to the contemporary Russian viewer as it is to the characters in the film.

In this capacity, one should analyze Anatoly’s spiritual guidance in the context of a larger national narrative. Birzache identifies Anatoly’s spiritual guidance as inherently anti-Soviet. While the scholar identifies that there is “no explicit criticism of the recent Soviet regime” in *The Island*, Anatoly’s disposition encapsulates “a mode of being in the world which becomes automatically subversive to any totalitarian system.”<sup>75</sup> This inherently anti-Soviet disposition is exemplified by the fool’s “penitential religiosity” which places him in stark contrast to the “state’s materialistic ideology.”<sup>76</sup>

Lungin depicts Anatoly’s awkward relationship with the Soviet Union’s materialistic ideology through the fool’s interactions with the mainland visitors of the monastery. As the director of the film makes note, the troubled visitors of the island are put in stark opposition to Anatoly’s religious values. Lungin makes note of these individuals, damning them:

Череда людей, проходящих перед о. Анатолием, — своеобразный портрет России. Монах для них — что-то вроде целителя или колдуна. Разовое чудо они готовы принять, но строить свою жизнь в новой реальности этого чуда не готовы.

This line of people passing in front of Anatoly is a kind of portrait of Russia. A monk for them is something like a healer or a sorcerer. They are ready to accept a one-time miracle, but they are not ready to build their lives in the new reality of this miracle.<sup>77</sup>

In many ways, Anatoly’s visitors represent the spiritual flaws of the Soviet system.

Anatoly’s first interaction is with a young pregnant girl who arrives on the island hoping to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 60

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

secure a blessing for an abortion. In this episode there is a conservative and traditional Orthodox critique on the topic of abortion, a practice standardized in the USSR. When Anatoly comes out to meet with the girl, he is noticeably wearing a pillow under his shirt, pretending to be pregnant himself. The erratic Anatoly yells at the young girl and eventually convinces her to keep her child by scaring her off. This first episode has an obvious relation to Anatoly's personal story of repentance, as he even references the regret, he feels from killing a man: "maybe I once killed a man."<sup>78</sup> However also embedded in it is a critique of the USSR's abortion culture.<sup>79</sup>

In a second visit, Anatoly greets a Soviet widow who is being haunted by dreams of her dead husband who supposedly died during WWII. When Anatoly reveals that her husband is alive the widow is obviously shocked. Anatoly advises the woman to travel to France to "comfort the ailing man before he dies and close his eyes."<sup>80</sup> Anatoly further advises the woman to "sell it all, lock, stock and barrel,"<sup>81</sup> referring to her livestock, in order to travel and tend to her husband. The woman is initially resistant, exposing her materialistic tendencies through her refusal to sell her pig. This mournful widow is exposed as a fraud, as she is unwilling to sell a pig in order to see her dying husband, whom she claims to love so dearly. This critique exposes the materialistic tendencies of a supposedly Marxist population.

In the third episode, a mother is more afraid of losing her job than her son's leg. After a woman brings her ailing son to Anatoly, the holy fool cures the boy of a rotting hip - something that couldn't be achieved by Soviet doctors and foreign surgeries. After being cured, Anatoly

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<sup>78</sup> Lungin, *The Island*, 17:23

<sup>79</sup> Popov, "Family planning in the USSR", PubMed, 1990, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12222340/>  
Report writes how the USSR accounted for 10-20% of all abortions performed worldwide ~ 10-11 million every year. Abortion as common practice during this time (early 1970s).

<sup>80</sup> Lungin, *The Island*, 39:32

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 40:10

advises the two to stay the night and receive communion. The mother, growing increasingly anxious, quietly responds saying that she cannot stay, as she has work tomorrow. Anatoly angrily asks the woman, “what is more important, your son or your work.”<sup>82</sup> The woman chooses her work, and Anatoly responds by kicking her out of his room. He later stops their departing boat, taking the boy in his arms and giving him to Father Iov to deal with. This episode also contains an obvious critique of the “portrait of Russia” that Lungin claims is both opportunistically religious and materialistic.

Finally, in the case of Tikhon and his possessed daughter, it’s not coincidental that the individual that is most strongly associated with Soviet power, Tikhon, is the figure afflicted by a literal demon. The now admiral must resort to spirituality and God in order to solve an issue his secular country couldn’t fix. While the admiral isn’t shown to be particularly materialistic, his role as a Soviet figurehead is of note. This analysis is also outside of Tikhon’s role in Anatoly’s repentance, which also justifies his presence on the island.<sup>83</sup>

Anatoly shares a personal relationship with each of these Soviet sinners, but his traumatic past guides his spiritual journey away from these hellish Soviet values. In creating a guide for the lost contemporary Russian soul, Lungin has created a binary that paints the Soviet past as hell. It is also in this binary that Anatoly is to be understood as existing in the liminal space between the Soviet past and his heavenly future – that being the purgatory of the Island.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 52:39

<sup>83</sup> One observation of note from scholarly literature focuses on Tikhon’s possessed daughter in this scene. Many scholars have debated if the demon was God-sent, which seems paradoxical, or if Anatoly was a far more demonic figure in the eyes of the writer/director. I think seeing the demon in this case as an extension of Soviet power makes sense as a continued critique of the Soviet Union that is hidden throughout the film.



## CHAPTER TWO: THOSE BLESSED FOOLS

One of the central debates facing historians and scholars about holy foolery is the question of the holy fool's purported sanity. Theologians discussed in this thesis up to this point have understood holy foolery as a feigned madness that hides the fool's inner perfection. However, several historians have questioned this construction of foolishness. Many Western scholars, such as the likes of Heinrich Gelzer, see the model of holy foolery as pure madness. George Fedotov tackles this question in his book *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II* and reaches a measured approach on the matter. While Fedotov recognizes the mistrust brought about by doubters, as well as a Church that always presume a holy fool's mask to be genuine, he turns his analysis to that of the Russian people. Fedotov makes the claim that for the Russian people, there is no difficulty in deciding whether a fool's madness is genuine or feigned. Instead, for them, the designation of feigned versus genuine madness is completely insignificant: "Sincere or feigned, a madman with religious charisma (prophecy, clear-sightedness, and so forth) is always a saint, perhaps the most beloved saint in Russia."<sup>84</sup>

This current chapter will focus on a specific archetype of the holy fool, that being the *blazhenny*, a figure that blurs the boundaries of (in)sanity. This discussion of *blazhenny* will be fruitful for my discussion and analysis of two Russian films: Andrei Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* / *Дом Дураков* (2002) and Yuri Bykov's *The Fool* / *Дурак* (2014).

### *About The Blessed*

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<sup>84</sup> George Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, (Harvard University Press), 323-324.

Due to its widespread and storied history, the cultural-religious phenomenon of holy foolery has come to encompass a wide spectrum of ascetic behavior. While Saint Symeon is the most widely acknowledged holy fool thanks to his scandalous and provocative antics, most canonized fools for Christ's sake were more conservative in their antics. Orthodox scholar Peter Bouteneff in the book *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, precisely addresses this discrepancy by investigating the different categories of holy foolery. Bouteneff recognizes three main "types" of holy fools, chiefly "the scandalous prankster," "the terrifying ascetic," and "the blessed idiot."<sup>85</sup> While Bouteneff does admit that in many cases these models interpenetrate each other, with saints existing somewhere between the porous borders, he maintains that recognizing and codifying these distinctions is significant and generative work.

Bouteneff's first category, the "scandalous prankster," has already been widely discussed throughout the current work. The scandalous prankster is a figure who, under the mask of madness, mobilizes scandal and blasphemy in order to reveal deep moral and social truths while also furthering his own ascetic repression of vainglory. The saint's life of Symeon of Emesa is quite influential in this regard and is recognized as "the most fully developed portrait"<sup>86</sup> of this specific category. Considering the substantial analysis already dedicated to this incarnation of the fool, we now turn to Bouteneff's other categories.

The "terrifying ascetic" is a category of *iurodstvo* that will not be thoroughly examined in the present work but is nonetheless worthy of acknowledgment. Bouteneff makes the claim that the "terrifying ascetic" serves as a counterpart to the "scandalous prankster."<sup>87</sup> While both

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<sup>85</sup> Bouteneff, "What Kind of Fool Am I?" in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 339

<sup>86</sup> Bouteneff, "What Kind of Fool Am I?", 339

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 341

figures maintain a feigned madness, this type of holy fool is defined by his intense and somber asceticism (almost in stark contrast to the prankster's playful nature). Bouteneff uses the example of St. Andrew Salos of Constantinople to illuminate the characteristics of this type of fool. St. Andrew's intense asceticism led to the figure to having frequent and intense communications with the spiritual world. In his hagiographic text, the saint is reported to have levitated during prayer, was privy to otherworldly insight and was even "in conversation with angels and in battles with demons."<sup>88</sup> Notably, St. Andrew mobilized his frequent encounters with the spiritual in order to "terrify or effectively to bully his hearers into repentance" with his chief aim being to "keep his sheep on the narrow path by instilling their freedom of choice between good and evil."<sup>89</sup> It is from the prototypical St. Andrew Salos, and others in his tradition, that such an intense asceticism develops a terrifying and fear-inducing dimension. Bouteneff considers this mode of holy foolery the most popular in the Russian canon. The scholar makes note that "the majority of Russian *iurodivy* resemble Andrew more than they do Symeon," with less of a focus on prankishness and more so on "the severest forms of asceticism."<sup>90</sup> Bouteneff does make a final note that not all fools in this model carry a "terrifying" dimension, but rather the only necessary aspects of this model of holy foolery are a somber and radical urban asceticism.

Bouteneff's final model of holy foolery is the primary focus of the current chapter. The figure Bouteneff describes as the "blessed idiot," is far more commonly known as the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 342

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Bouteneff describes two anecdotes to illustrate how the terrifying ascetic utilizes fear to create revelations in others: Firstly, in an episode with a grave robber that didn't heed St. Andrew's warning to stop his immoral doings, the grave robber comes face to face with the zombified corpse of one of his victims. The corpse lectures and strikes the robber, making him blind. The robber consequently spends the rest of his days a beggar, praying to God and remembering Andrew's advice. Secondly, Bouteneff tells of St. Basil who employs similar fear-inducing tactics to create revelations in others. There was a specific scene where three girls who laugh at the Saint are temporarily blinded until they "repented at his feet in tears," after which he miraculously restores their vision by blowing into their eyes. (Bouteneff 342-343)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 343

“*blazhenny*” (блаженный). Bouteneff describes the *blazhenny* as a holy fool whose madness is genuine and not feigned. Like many other scholars, Bouteneff recognizes the inherent challenge in distinguishing if the fools’ madness is genuine or not. However, he writes that the “foolishness of this kind of saint. . . is manifested not in prankishness, nor in demon stories, but usually in an intellectual and physical simplicity and lowliness.”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the “Blessed Idiot” type embodies such a profound kindness and pure heart only accessible to those suffering from mental disability. Bouteneff draws on the prototype of St. Ksenia of Petersburg, a fool that lived in Russia’s 18<sup>th</sup> century, but was only canonized near the end of the Soviet Union. St. Ksenia is well studied in scholarship about holy foolery, especially in relation to queer and gender studies.<sup>92</sup> The Saint was known to live on the streets according to the Russian ascetic tradition and was even allegedly blessed with a gift of clairvoyance, one which she used to predict the deaths of several Russian tsars. The foolishness/madness described in Ksenia’s saint’s life is completely unique, especially in its comparison to the other hagiographic literature previously covered. After the death of her lieutenant husband, Ksenia would go on to “take the name of her husband and refused to be called by her own.”<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Ksenia “dressed in his uniform; she gave away her possessions (including her house); and she began to roam the streets of St. Petersburg, collecting alms and enduring the summer heat and winter cold.”<sup>94</sup> Referencing

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 344

<sup>92</sup> St. Ksenia is studied by almost all scholars referenced in this thesis (Ivanov, Bodin, Hlebowicz, etc). Interestingly, Ksenia isn’t the only holy fool that has been linked to a queer identity as even some scholars look to Saint Symeon as having a male lover while in the caves outside of Emesa. As we will see in films studied in the future chapters (specifically with *The Student* and *No Place for Fools*) this connection is extremely fascinating and layered.

<sup>93</sup> Shtyrkov, “The Unmerry Widow: The Blessed Kseniia of Petersburg in Hagiography and Hymnography” in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Slavica Publishers Indiana University, 2011), 282.

<sup>94</sup> Shtyrkov, “The Unmerry Widow”, 284

I want to mention a film here that I considered including in my research, but ultimately decided it didn’t fit into my overall thesis. The 2018 film *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (Человек Который Удивил Всех) by Russian directors Aleksey Chupov and Natasha Merkulova shares many similarly themes with the Saint’s Life of Ksenia of Petersburg. The film tells the story of a Siberian forest guard who discovers he has cancer and will soon die. Although Yegor attempts to cure his cancer through traditional methods and even pagan shamanism, he is initially

Ksenia's hagiography, Bouteneff makes the assertion that "strange behavior was not a put-on," and that she "clearly suffered a breakdown" resultant from the death of her husband.<sup>95</sup>

Continuing with this logic, Bouteneff claims that Ksenia's "special kind of sanctity, of a very enduring kind"<sup>96</sup> is due to her disorderd mental state. In Bouteneff's final note on the "Blessed Idiot" the scholar makes important note of the role of *blazhenny* for 19<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Bouteneff specifically cites this influence being apparent through Dostoevsky's "Stinking Elizaveta" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as Marie and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.<sup>97</sup>

Scholars Per-Arne Bodin and John Sayward continue our discussion of the Blessed Idiot/*Blazhenny* and holy foolery. In *Language, Canonization, and Holy Foolery*, Per-Arne Bodin makes note of some of the etymological features of the many different names of holy foolery. While he Byzantine name for this phenomenon, *salia/salos*, roughly translates to persons who have been "touched,"<sup>98</sup> the Russian equivalent, *iurodivy/iurodstvo* carries with it a more negative connotation. The term *iurodivy* originally developed from the Russian word *ypod* (*urod*), a term that when defined means a whole host of values: "degenerate, monster, freak." Here, Bodin addresses the fact that even today the term *iurodivy* "still carries negative connotations and can refer to both a 'crackpot' and a holy fool."<sup>99</sup> These appellations are then

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unsuccessful. Yegor then hears of a story of legendary drake Zhamba who was able to escape death by disguising himself as a duck and live out his life as a duck. It is here that Yegor undergoes a complete transformation and begins taking the identity of a woman in an attempt to cheat death. Yegor's transformation draws intense criticism from his family and his local village. Also, a part of her change, this new woman requires her to be mute, all while facing the local torment. Yegor's tragic story, although not identical to Xenia's, share numerous similarities to the Saint. The ridicule Yegor faces as well as the character's hybrid identity are so similar in fact that Yegor might even fit into the model of the "Blessed Idiot." Like Ksenia, Yegor might have faced a mental breakdown or might have been driven to such a change due to their existential circumstance.

<sup>95</sup> Bouteneff, "What Kind of Fool Am I?", 345

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Bodin, *Language Canonization and Holy Foolery: Studies in Postsoviet Russian Culture and the Orthodox Tradition*, (Stockholm: Stockholm Univ., 2009), 192

<sup>99</sup> Bodin, *Language Canonization and Holy Foolery*, 192

contrasted with the term *blazhenny* - a popular Russian designation that is derived from the Beatitudes and translates as “God’s people” or “the blessed.” In this contrast, Bodin recognizes the “two entirely different views of the phenomenon” of holy foolery, that express its two polar halves.<sup>100</sup> The two terms have been notably conflated throughout history and are often used interchangeably in primary texts and scholarly literature.

In his analysis, Per-Arne Bodin brings attention to the fact that the term “*blazhenny*” comes from the Beatitudes in the Bible. While holy foolery has its Biblical justifications as seen/cited in Paul’s First Epistle in Corinthians, theologian John Sayward demonstrates the Blessed Idiot’s connection to several other gospel texts of importance. In his analysis, Sayward points specifically to the books of Matthew and Luke, and in doing so, quotes the following passage(s):

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”<sup>101</sup>

Sayward identifies several key takeaways from this specific scripture. Firstly, the scholar puts great emphasis on the comparison drawn here between Jesus’s disciples and the wise and understanding. Sayward identifies Jesus’s critique of all worldly wisdom in these lines, with the Son of God implying that “the wisdom of wise men and Pharisees blinds them from seeing the truth of God’s mysteries.”<sup>102</sup> Instead of these supposedly learned men, it is the simple uneducated group of fishermen that are Jesus’s apostles who are truly enlightened and privy to God’s divine

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> 1 Matt. 11:25 / 1 Luke 10:21

<sup>102</sup> Saward, “Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality”, *Folly to Greeks*, 6, 1980, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780192132307.003.0001>

wisdom. This comparison is very Pauline in its nature, with a similar contrast of divine and worldly wisdom present in Corinthians. However, what is so uniquely established in these lines is the critical motif of childlikeness in faith.

Throughout Matthew and Luke there are several references to this key motif of childlikeness and its importance in Christian faith. Sayward points to the following scripture in his analysis:

And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>103</sup>

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.<sup>104</sup>

These lines not only justify a childlikeness in faith but evidently go so far as to deem this approach an essential part of the spiritual journey. In accepting this child-like purity, the Christian believer rejects world wisdom, becomes entirely receptive to God’s will, and also emulates Christ in his position as the Son of God. This reading is according to Jesus’s words in Matthew; that is, we must become like the Son in order to receive divine insight from the Father. This childlikeness has an extreme kenotic dimension, and in the case of the blessed idiot/*blazhenny*, it justifies the sanctity of the fools’ behavior as a physical manifestation of these words/ideas. While the words *iurodivy* and *blazhenny* have been conflated in the Russian context, they designate different sects of holy foolery. While both the *iurodivy* and *blazhenny* represent a foolishness for Christ’s sake, the *iurodivy*, with his scandalous pranks and terrifying antics, is distinguished from the *blazhenny*’s foolishness that is but an ultimate simplicity and childlike purity.

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<sup>103</sup> 1 Matt. 18: 3

<sup>104</sup> 1 Luke 18: 17

## *House of Fools*

Andrei Konchalovsky's 2002 film *Дом Дураков (House of Fools)* is an extension of the acclaimed Russian director's pacifist spirit. The film, set during the First Chechen War (1994-1996), tells the story of the inhabitants of a psychiatric hospital situated on the Chechnya-Ingushetia border. While the film is based on true events, Konchalovsky takes several artistic liberties in crafting this narrative. The film starts by introducing its cast of clinically insane misfits, all of whom are engaged in their nightly ritual of watching a train pass by on a nearby bridge. Among the crowd is the film's quiet protagonist, Zhanna. Zhanna is notably calmer and more innocent than her fellow patients. In this scene, the film camera briefly adopts Zhanna's perspective, and in it the viewer sees Zhanna's idyllic and jubilant fantasy world. The center of Zhanna's fantasy is her imagined engagement with Canadian singer Bryan Adams. This "romance" is portrayed in the numerous scenes in which Adams serenades her to the song *Have You Ever Really Loved a Woman?* Interestingly, music plays a significant role in Zhanna's fantasy, as her imagined world, visually distinguished by a warm filter, is linked to the trusty accordion she carries around.

The film's opening continues by introducing the audience to the institution's other notable characters such as the rebellious Vika, the authoritative Ali, and the hospital's good doctor. The next day is a portrait of normalcy at the hospital: small bickering over spots in line, Zhanna leading a dance class, and patients at the mess hall. However, behind closed doors the hospital's staff talk of the increasingly concerning nature of the violent conflict in the nearby area. This impending doom is underscored later that evening when the patients' beloved train is nowhere to be found. In a scene where the doctor and a nurse discuss the tense situation, the doctor creates a plan to evacuate the inmates before the conflict becomes too dangerous.



However, by the next morning, everything in the psychiatric institute had been abandoned and the patients are left to their own free will.

Since the hospital is physically situated in the middle of the fight between the Chechen resistance and the Russian military, the institution quickly becomes involved in the ongoing war. The patients' day of ferocious self-rule is cut short after the hospital is bombed and the frightened patients retreat back inside the building. The first outside inhabitants of the psychiatric hospital are a small band of Chechen fighters, who after clearing the institute, begin cohabiting with our protagonists. While exploring the building and meeting the Chechen soldiers, Zhanna meets Ahmed in the hospital's basement. Besides Zhanna, Ahmed is the most important character in this film, both through his relationship to Zhanna and through his development throughout the film. Zhanna finds Ahmed playing her stolen accordion, and rather than angrily interrogating the men, she quietly says: "that's my accordion."<sup>105</sup> The men, finding the girl humorous, proceed to make a spectacle out of the innocent Zhanna. Ahmed instigates this spectacle by beckoning Zhanna to come and play her accordion and dance for them. Zhanna's innocence blinds her to the soldiers' malicious intent, and she proceeds to gleefully dance for them. Ahmed, diving deeper into the spectacle, teasingly asks Zhanna to marry him, a request the girl takes completely seriously. Although she initially rejects his suggestive attempts, due to her sworn allegiance to her "fiancé" Bryan Adams, Ahmed pressures Zhanna to come visit the soldiers later that evening.

Later that afternoon, the hospital and all its inhabitants are thrown into chaos when a Russian tank arrives at the gates outside the base. While the Chechen soldiers all rush to their

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<sup>105</sup> Konchalovsky, *House of Fools*, 35:49

battle positions, they are surprised to see the tank waving a white flag. It is revealed that these Russian soldiers have arrived at the hospital in order to trade a Chechen body for some money. This entire exchange is rather tense as the two respective captains meet each other in the street between the hospital and the gate. While the Chechen commander Vakhid sends two soldiers to identify the body, Ahmed is shown in the hospital's attic aiming a rocket launcher at the tank. While Ahmed is focusing on the situation, Zhanna inquisitively tiptoes behind him. While identifying the Chechen body, the young Chechen and Russian soldiers strike a friendly deal – exchanging pot for ammunition. When the identity body is confirmed to Vakhid, he sends his men to retrieve the body as well as the money required to purchase it. During this process the two commanders take a moment to sit and “count the money.”<sup>106</sup> While sitting, the Russian commander notices a tattoo on Vakhid's hand, signifying Vakhid's military service in the 20<sup>th</sup> Paratrooper Regiment during the Soviet-Afghan war. Fatefully enough, this same military regiment saved his life along with the rest of the 25<sup>th</sup> Paratrooper Regiment. It is with this realization that the two become animated, recalling their shared memories of the war. However, almost immediately after, the two men realize that their past brotherhood is dissolved in the light of the current conflict. This somber realization is, in essence, Konchalovsky's main goal throughout *House of Fools*.

In telling a story about a psychiatric hospital stuck between the armed conflict on the Chechen/Russian border, Konchalovsky mobilizes “foolishness” in order to “inform the vision of the film.”<sup>107</sup> By this, the director paints a picture of war where the inmates of hospital are saner than the soldiers and conflict outside its walls. This central premise is in line with the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 43:20

<sup>107</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 72

promise of holy foolery, that when diluted down, accentuates the sacred wisdom brought about in madness (feigned or real). This episode between the Russian and Chechen commanders and soldiers is one such moment in which these men (as well as the film's viewers) realize the absurdity of the war. While Konchalovsky employs this technique several times throughout the film,<sup>108</sup> he also utilizes Zhanna in a similarly revelatory capacity. That is, he employs her in the role of holy fool - specifically that of a *blazhennaya*.<sup>109</sup>

Zhanna's holy foolery tightly fits the models established by Bouteneff, Bodin, and Sayward. Birzache, in her book *The Holy Fool in European Cinema* goes as far as stating that Zhanna, "is fashioned in the mold of a modern holy fool" on a "symbolic level."<sup>110</sup> For Birzache, Zhanna embodies an almost child-like innocence and purity that is utilized to create moral and spiritual revelations in those around her. Bouteneff would attribute this peaceful disposition to her mental disability, which he believes grants the character access to a higher standard of purity than others. Moreover, Zhanna is shown to have revelatory capabilities are demonstrated in Ahmed, a character who, through his relationship with Zhanna, is ultimately driven to "admit the insanity of his own world" and to realize his need "for cure and salvation"<sup>111</sup> as demonstrated in his final words to the hospital's doctor: "I'm sick. I need to be treated."<sup>112</sup> Finally, as exhibited

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<sup>108</sup> A later scene in the film, after Russian soldiers had taken control of the hospital, shows two Russian soldiers shooting at each other while clearing the building. The two soldiers became confused thinking they were shooting at Chechen forces. When the soldiers realize they are shooting at their "own" people they are dumbfounded. By debasing the soldiers and making the war full of these seemingly absurd episodes, Konchalovsky paints a foolish picture.

<sup>109</sup> Olejniczak states the following on Zhanna's unique form of holy foolishness: "It would be hard to find the religious aspect of the foolishness in Konchalovsky's film, but the notion of the mad who can know and see more than the rest of the "normal and healthy" society is definitely emphasized in the discussed film text" (from Waligorska-Olejniczak, 148). The following chapter will contain a greater discussion on the relationship between holy foolery and secularism that informs my analysis here.

<sup>110</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, 73

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>112</sup> Konchalovsky, *House of Fools*, 1:43:30

by the scenes with her accordion, Zhanna utilizes music to serve as a pacifist mediator in conflicts that come up throughout the movie.

In returning to the plot summary, we now turn to the fateful Chechen dinner that Ahmed made Zhanna promise she'd come to. In the previous scene, Zhanna has come around to Ahmed's proposal, and the good news is spread to all the hospital's patients. These patients help Zhanna get prepared for her "engagement party," with some tearfully sharing their many goodbyes. Zhanna also says her goodbyes to Ali, a patient who is in love with her, before finally setting off with a packed bag and her trusty accordion. When Zhanna arrives at the Chechen dinner, the whole room becomes quiet, and even Ahmed is shocked at her visit. When the Chechen Commander Vakhid learns of Ahmed's intent to marry Zhanna, the two men get into a shouting match. The conflict soon turns into an all-out brawl with many of the Chechens getting up to join in on the fight. It's precisely at this moment that Konchalovsky employs a cinematic technique in order to highlight the insanity of conflict and the madness brought about by the war in all these soldiers. During the fight, Zhanna brings out her accordion and starts playing. As seen previously in the film, Zhanna's accordion, and music in general, are part of her delusion. In previous scenes of conflict, Zhanna uses her accordion to create a fake world in which all those fighting suddenly break out in dance. These fantasy scenes are distinguished by a warm filter that paints an idyllic reality over the grim truth.<sup>113</sup> Generally, in scenes like this, the camera quickly switches back to reality in order to contrast Zhanna's pacifist fantasy with the dim and sad truth. However, this scene is different from those others. At no point does Zhanna's warm-filtered idyllic world come about, but after the music is switched to a Chechen tune, the room suddenly

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<sup>113</sup> One such scene happens earlier in the movie (21:53) when a patient of the hospital is being held down so that he can be administered medicine. The man fights back against the hospital staff, and the watchful Zhanna starts playing her accordion and imagines the staff and the patient dancing gleefully in a warm filter. Then it cuts back to the now sedated patient. (Should I include photos in my honors project? I feel like it could be useful in moments like these.)

breaks into manic dance. It's initiated by Vakhid, who, flinging his chair backwards into the ongoing fight, breaks out into an almost manic dance. Quickly, the whole room follows suit into this hysterical show of dance and song. The fight and tensions that existed just a moment before evaporates, and Zhanna and Ahmed join in the festivities. This joyous parade is only interrupted by Ali who has come to "rescue" Zhanna from the Chechen soldiers.

Throughout this manic and hysterical sequence, the warm filter that designated Zhanna's fantastical world never once appears. This dance sequence is firmly placed in our reality, signifying that Zhanna's mission to promote peace through music and dance has been finally realized. However, in this scene lie two plausible and interconnected readings. In one, Zhanna is once again established as the pacifist *blazhennaya* whose righteous simplemindedness brings about positive change in her surroundings. Zhanna's folly in this case provides "a more compelling argument for peace. . . than could have been achieved through a lifetime of reasoning."<sup>114</sup> However, another reading contextualizes this moment as yet another case of the outside world being more insane than that of mental asylum. In this sequence, the Chechen soldiers recreate Zhanna's fantasy world. The soldiers answer Zhanna's fantastical call for peace with their own manic and hysterical response. In this respect, the soldiers are part of Zhanna's shared madness. The only difference is that the soldiers' madness is brought about by the conflict they are currently engulfed in.

After dinner, Zhanna and a drunk Ahmed share some tender moments together while drinking outside. The two discuss their plans for marriage, with Zhanna proclaiming that she can't marry Ahmed due to her commitment to Brian Adam, and Ahmed revealing that he never

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<sup>114</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, 74

truly intended to marry her. The two become closer in these moments, with Ahmed reflects on his life and his motivations to join the war effort. After their conversation, the two end up sleeping beside each other in the gazebo outside of the hospital. However, this is all seemingly undone the next morning with the now-sober Ahmed who tries to push away the newly love-struck Zhanna. During their conversation, the two are interrupted by several bombs falling on the hospital and its surrounding grounds. This torrent of bombing forces the Chechen resistance to evacuate the psychiatric institution in a hurried rush. Throughout all the chaos, Zhanna tries to convince Ahmed and Vakhid to take her with them, but she is promptly pushed away and left behind. Devastated, Zhanna plays her accordion amidst all the rubble and artillery fire, hoping to fall back into her cheerful fantasy world.

The heartbroken Zhanna returns to her room and wanders the hospital while Russian forces storm the newly vacated base. Several small moments pass during this period, involving Zhanna destroying photos of her and Ahmed, as well as another one of Zhanna's Brian Adams fantasies. It is while walking around the hospital, Zhanna stumbles upon an elderly patient with whom she talks about the nature of conflict, war, and human nature, a person whom the scholar Aline Birzache has identified as representing God in the film.<sup>115</sup>

With Russian forces reclaiming the psychiatric institution, the hospital's doctor is finally able to return and treat his patients. In the film's ending Konchalovsky accentuates the film's

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<sup>115</sup> Birzache identifies this scene as significant in its relationship to holy foolery. The scholar writes: “[Zhanna] also encounters an extraordinary mysterious presence: an aged patient who thinks he is God. Handed an apple he imagines it to be the planet and refuses to consume it in spite of its inhabitants hopelessly ‘loving and destroying each other for generations and dying’” (Birzache, 73). Birzache understands this patient to actually *be* God, and this conversation relays the holy fool's privy access to divine wisdom. The only verbal mention of God in this exchange (as well as in the rest of the film), is Zhanna's line of dialogue where she states, “the nurse says God forgives, will he forgive everyone?” (1:27:34). The elderly patient responds to this statement saying, “which God?” before engaging in his apple metaphor. He does mention that the people on the apple “stare up in hope at my face” (1:28:19) and that all he can do is forgive them as he does Zhanna, however I'm wary to go to the lengths Birzache does in her analysis.

central theme: that the war outside of the walls of the psychiatric institute is less sane than the people inside. He does so by having the hospital receive a host of new “patients” brought in from the war. Chief among these new patients is Ahmed. Ahmed now hides among the patients while escaping from the Russian troops in search of runaway Chechens. During lunch, Ahmed sits among the patients who questioningly glare at Zhanna’s ex-lover. This sequence is made more climatic when a Russian soldier asks the patients if they have seen any questionable and unrecognizable figures. While several of the film’s characters have reason to oust Ahmed, specifically the heartbroken Zhanna or the envious Ali, none do. In this choice, the patients choose peace over the violence they have been subjected to in the past days. The doctor, who oversaw this interaction, looks to Ahmed who proclaims his sickness in front of the crowd and is finally accepted as “one of us” by the whole crew of patients.<sup>116</sup> The film then ends with Zhanna’s last musical hallucination. Just as in the film’s opening, Brian Adams serenades Zhanna and her friends, to his song *Have You Ever Loved a Woman?* In summary, the film’s ending returns the hospital to a state of normalcy that rejects conflict and radiates a peaceful love as represented in Zhanna’s pure romance with the fabulous Brian Adam.

In the end, Konchalovsky’s film, and his holy foolish protagonist Zhanna, employ insanity to bring about moral and spiritual revelations in both the filmic characters and the audience. Although Zhanna doesn’t have an ascetic core, nor does she feign her insanity, I assert that she is coded along the behavioral pattern of *iurodstvo*, specifically that of a *blazhennaya*. Zhanna’s position outside of the institutions that brought about the Chechen war, allows her to exist as a critique of the conflict from the perspective of an outsider. Furthermore, her

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<sup>116</sup> Konchalovsky, *House of Fools*, 1:43:36

peacemaking agenda ultimately guides the film's moral center. In a way, Zhanna is the subversive voice of Konchalovsky, it is through her that he spreads his peaceful politics.

### **The Fool**

Compared to *House of Fools*, Yuri Bykov's 2014 film *The Fool / Дурак* is a noticeably grittier narrative. *The Fool* is Bykov's second showing in his series of films that focus on the extensive corruption that plagues Russia's various institutions. In *The Fool*, Bykov paints the portrait of an unnamed Russian provincial town plagued with a corrupted government, a dishonorable public, and dilapidated infrastructure. The film's opening sequence is remarkably brutal and sets the tone for what is to come.

The movie begins with Kolya, the district's chief plumber, who is interrogating his wife, Vera. Kolya is seemingly drunk and grows increasingly aggressive with Vera as to the whereabouts of his stashed money. Although Vera is adamant that she didn't take his money, Kolya still threatens to "beat her face in."<sup>117</sup> Kolya then moves on to his daughter's room and continues his interrogation there. Vera follows suit and finds Kolya choking his daughter. Vera frantically tries to get him to stop but she too is assaulted and punched by the drunkard. Kolya's abusive assault on his family is only stopped by a sudden burst pipe that burns and scorches the shirtless Kolya.

In a neighboring building, the viewer is introduced to the film's protagonist and his family. Dmitri is shown studying for exams for his engineering degree with his wife Masha and his child sitting behind him. Masha speaks first, asking Dmitri if he "really thinks he is going to

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<sup>117</sup> Bykov, *The Fool*, 01:18



pass.”<sup>118</sup> Masha is doubtful of Dmitri’s honest attempts at education and career growth as she reportedly hears that “everyone says you’ve got to bribe someone” nowadays.<sup>119</sup> Besides being an engineering student, Dmitri also works as a plumber as a side job to support his family. While the two adults discuss Dmitri’s plans, the camera positions itself to highlight Dmitri and his son Anton. While Dmitri works on answering questions in his textbook, his son is shown directly behind him drawing in a notebook. The two characters are mirror images of each other within this shot. Thus, as early as the character’s first scene, Bykov associates Dmitri with a certain childlikeness. Dmitri’s childlikeness (frequently called his righteousness) is a prevailing motif throughout the film, with many characters evoking this language when talking with and about him. Masha is the first to make this connection in telling Dima that he is “not a kid,” despite his righteous motives.<sup>120</sup>

Throughout this film, Dmitri is situated in the model of the holy fool, specifically that of a *blazhenny*. While Dima is seemingly without any mental handicap, the character’s almost saintly morality and his noted “childlikeness” brutally clash with the corrupted world around him. In this sense, Dmitri is fashioned in the likes of Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. Besides the similarity in the two work’s titles, as well as the similarities in narratives (a pure man who underscores an amoral Russian society), the film’s director in an interview with the Guardian makes this connection clear. In the interview Bykov states that:

Dima Nikitin is not really the main character. What’s interesting is how the people around Dima react to him; to the appearance of this saint-like being. He makes life difficult for everyone else with his moral rectitude.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 03:59

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 4:06

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 04:15

<sup>121</sup> Walker & Bykov, “Director Yuri Bykov: ‘Russian Viewers Get Angry with Me’”, The Guardian, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/26/yury-bykov-the-fool-interview>

Dmitri's saintly contrast to the rest of his surroundings is much in line with the nature of the holy fool. Like in *House of Fools*, Dmitri's revelatory capacity is shown in his relation to the mad world that surrounds him. Dmitri's purity clashes with society's amorality and produces a shocking effect. Unlike Zhanna, Dmitri's holy-fool-like quest is ultimately unsuccessful in causing moral and spiritual revelations in others. In the end, Dmitri is punished for his good deeds, which contributes to the film's grim mood.

However, it is important to once again bring up the question of the fool's "layered spectatorship." As discussed in the previous chapter, the contemporary construction of the holy fool as the filmic protagonist is still a novel concept. Holy fools are historically presented without perspective, as the holy fool's mask of feigned madness is intended to hide their true self. In having a holy-fool-like character as the movie's protagonist, the fool's antics are meant to "provoke the film audience probably as much as he provokes his [diegetic] surroundings."<sup>122</sup> In the case of Dmitri, his "outrageous behavior in relation to the surrounding society" that is "central to the phenomenon of traditional holy foolishness" is notably inverted.<sup>123</sup> Dmitri's actions are atypical in the amoral society he lives in, and, in this way, his purity is what is scandalous and taboo about his character. Dmitri's juxtaposition against the town's hierarchical and corrupted institutions is carnivalesque<sup>124</sup> in nature and highlights his holy folly.

Although Bykov's construction of holy foolery is definitively atypical, the director is quoted in an interview with ProfiCinema making the connection himself. In the interview, Bykov states:

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<sup>122</sup> Bodin, "The Holy Fool as a TV Hero", 4

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Carnavalesque is explored in greater depth in the Chapter 3, but the theory is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnavalesque can be understood as a mocking/satirical challenge to hierarchy and all forms of traditional authority, specifically utilizing humor in order to do so.

Был такой момент, что я действительно думал про название, немножко сомневался, наверное, будут смеяться, шутить, но если Артем искренне дождет свою роль до финала, как он это делает, с моей точки зрения, то тогда, может, тем, кто в начале картины смеялся, будет стыдно к финалу. Назвать фильм «Юродивый» - это пафосно, «Аварийное здание» - это как догадайся сам, а «Дурак» - в лоб.

There was a moment that I really thought about the title [of the film], I was a little doubtful, thought that people would laugh, joke, but if Artem (Dmitri's Actor) can sincerely achieve his role to the film's finale, as he does from my point of view, then maybe those who in the beginning of the picture laughed will be ashamed by the finale. To name the film "holy fool" is too pompous, "Emergency Building is like you might guess yourself, and "The Fool" is right on.<sup>125</sup>

Considering the director contemplated naming his film "the holy fool," justifies looking at the film through an analytical lens. Like in *House of Fools* Bykov mobilizes the fool's revelatory potential in crafting a political critique of Russia's institutions.

Returning to the plot summary, the viewer is soon introduced to Dima's family. Over dinner, Dmitri's mother attempts to convince the young student to buy a garage and start a business. Dmitri rejects the proposal, citing that he "needs to pay for the semester."<sup>126</sup> His dissatisfied mother is quick to rant about Dima and his "righteous father" whom he takes after. Dima's mother is fed up with their current situation, and their poor standards of living. In this rant she particularly complains about Dmitri's father. A man she claims is "all righteous" but has lived "in dirt for [his] whole life."<sup>127</sup> She is especially frustrated at Dmitri's dad for not stealing anything and having never "brought anything home" leading to their poor health and wealth.<sup>128</sup> This outburst continues escalating until both Dima and his father storm out of the room to talk outside. While outside, Dima and his father begin repairing a bench that the local school children

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<sup>125</sup> Bykov & Tokmasheva, "The Fool is Who I Really Am", ProfiCinema, 2014, <https://www.proficinema.com/interviews/detail.php?ID=159723>

<sup>126</sup> Bykov, *The Fool*, 08:16

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 10:30

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 10:49

have made a habit of destroying. During this exchange, Dima's father reflects on his choices in this life, and finally comes to accept his foolishness:

I've lived sixty years and have neither friends nor enemies. Everyone considers me a fool. At work, it's because I work and don't steal. Here it's because I replace stolen light bulbs. And because I repair the bench every evening. I am a fool.<sup>129</sup>

These words also apply to Dima, whose righteous mission throughout the film also isolates him and designates him as the titular "fool." While Dima tries to convince his father otherwise, Dima's work calls for him and launches the film's course of events into action.

This action begins when the young plumber is sent to the city's 32nd dormitory, a building outside of his district, to address the burst pipe from the film's opening. Although Kolya is the building's chief plumber, he is out of commission due to his injuries and lack of sobriety. While police and doctors attend to Kolya and his family, the group of plumbers notice something where pipe burst that gives them pause. Dima rushes out of the building to discover several large wall cracks that run up the entire length of the building. Furthermore, the building's foundation has shifted, causing the building to start tilting. When Dima returns to tell the news to his fellow plumbers, he advises them to keep quiet and that he'll talk to Fedotov about the issue the next day. Fedotov, although not seen yet at this point in the film, is the oft-mentioned local government's public housing director. Fedotov is known to be skimming money from several of the town's infrastructure projects, leading to such poor living conditions as demonstrated by the 32nd dormitory. It's with this plan in place that Dima heads home for the night.

Later that night, Dmitri is unable to sleep, completely lost in thought about the building. Unable to bear it any longer, Dima hurriedly gets up, checks the building's blueprints, and gets

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 12:46 - 13:14

dressed. Dima wakes up his whole family in the process, alerting them to the dormitory's dire state. With the building set to collapse in the next twenty-four hours, Dima decides he needs to evacuate the building's inhabitants. The group decides to avoid going to Fedotov about the issue, as they suspect he'll dismiss it, and Dima's mother puts him in contact with her associate at the mayor's office. Dima learns of the mayor's birthday party happening that night, with all the town's important officials in attendance. With this, the plumber sets off into the night to bring the issue to the town's council.

The mayor's birthday party is a portrait of drunken chaos, full of infidelity and conflict. Dmitri arrives just in time to hear the mayor, Nina Galaganova, affectionately nicknamed "Mama," receiving a celebratory birthday speech. After the speech, Dmitri is finally able to talk with the drunk Nina Galaganova. Nina quickly sobers up after hearing Dmitri's grave news, and she calls for all the provincial officers to meet for an impromptu meeting. Once assembled the drunk officers do not seem to realize the severity of the situation at hand. Fedotov arrives lastly and accosts Dima for "stirring up shit."<sup>130</sup> During Dima's address on the events of the night, Fedotov continuously interjects and berates him. During the heated exchange, Dmitri, discussing the building's visibly damaged state, proclaims that "even a child can see" the dormitory's devastating state.<sup>131</sup> Here again, Dmitri is associated with childlikeness, as he will continue to be throughout the film. At this point, the council realizes the grave danger of the situation, as the buildings' eight hundred and twenty residents are at stake. The tension in the council room eventually boils over, with the various officers condemning each other for their various crimes and pocketing money. This all goes on while Dmitri quietly watches the warring council

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 38:49

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 41:14

members. Nina finally bursts out and sets the room back into order. To address the situation, the mayor sends Fedotov and the town's fire chief Matyugin to go with Dmitri and confirm the building's tragic state.

The three men set off to investigate the status of Dormitory #32. While Fedotov is initially suspecting and distrustful of the dire nature, he is ultimately convinced by Dmitri. The men return to the council with a confirmation of the dormitory's impending collapse. This confirmation is effectively a death sentence to the board, as the evacuation of the building's residents and its eventual collapse will reveal the officials' history of embezzlement. Considering the news, Nina breaks down in tears and shouts. After being reined in, Nina and one of her chief officers attempt to find housing for the building's residents amongst the city's already established housing crisis. During her search, Dmitri sits with the council's chiefs as they mull over the current situation as well as their possible firings. At one point, Fedotov begins laying into Dmitri, unable to understand the plumber's motives for bringing about this whole issue. Dima talks about the lives that would be lost if he didn't alert the board at which Fedotov bursts out, claiming that the people are utter "trash and rejects" that should "probably just die."<sup>132</sup> Dmitri tries again by bringing up the numerous children that would also be killed in the collapse. This time, the police chief advises Dmitri to stop "grinding that axe here" referring to him as a "kid" in the process.<sup>133</sup> The police chief continues by explaining to Dima that the board members are "old and seasoned" having seen "a lot in this life." He concludes by stating that almost everyone in the dormitory "either has an arrest or a conviction to their name" and that "if there

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 19:30

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 1:20:05

were fewer of those buildings, the world would be a better place.”<sup>134</sup> After his monologue, the chief receives a phone call from none other than Nina Galganova.

On the other side of town, Nina is unable to secure the necessary housing for the dormitory’s residents. She is ultimately convinced by her assistant chief to murder Fedotov, Matyugin, and Dmitri and claim they were responsible for the collapse and had run away with the money. The police chief after receiving the call sends the three men off to “visit the building” and organizes their assassination. Dmitri, Matyugin, and Fedotov quickly realize that they are not travelling to the dilapidated building and are instead being taken to a remote place to be killed. Although, Matyugin and Fedotov are ultimately killed by the police officers, before his death, Fedotov convinces the guards to “let the kid [Dima] go.”<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile, the remaining officers burn all the paperwork relevant to Dormitory #32. While the documents burn, Nina asks for God’s forgiveness, to which her vice chief replies: “God created this life and made us live it.”<sup>136</sup>

Dmitri rushes home and fills his worried parents in on the night’s chaotic episode. He insists that he needs to take Vera and Anton away for a while until it is safe to return. Saying goodbye to his parents, Dmitri gathers his wife and kid and they hastily drive away from the city. However, while passing by Dormitory #32, Anton notices that no such evacuation is taking place as Nina promised. Here, Dmitri makes the stunning choice of letting his wife and kid leave without him while he notifies all the building’s residents of its eventual collapse. Having successfully evacuated the building, Dmitri meets an angry crowd of residents outside. Kolya, the abusive drunk who is fed up with Dima’s antics, parades the protagonist around the crowd. Kolya announces Dmitri as a hero and a decent person before striking him in the gut. The crowd

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 1:20:29

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 1:27:49

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 1:33:11

quickly joins in on beating Dima senseless. The crowd soon disperses back into the building leaving behind Dima's lifeless corpse. The film ends with this grim shot.

Bykov's *The Fool* demonstrates the insanity of morality in modern-day Russia, as well as a society whose institutions are crumbling, ready to take a whole host of people down with it. Our titular and revelatory character is fashioned as a modern-day fool - a figure who highlights the sins of the world around him while retaining his pure soul. While it is true that Dima lacks many of the typological standards of holy fool, his utilization within the film is in line with the holy fool's motivations. While these issues will be better addressed in the following chapter, both *The Fool* and *House of Fools* utilizes characters in the *blazhenny* mold to push a political critic of Russia's social institutions. In this critic, a central juxtaposition is between our protagonist and the world around them highlight the corruption and insanity that surrounds Russia's political system. The next chapter continues this analysis of the increasingly postmodern phenomenon of *iurodstvo*.



### CHAPTER THREE: THE POSTMODERN MASK

On November 10th, 2013, Peter Pavlensky infamously nailed his scrotum to the cobblestone of Moscow's Red Square. This gruesome and defiant act was the third installation in a series of body-torture protest performances. In the police report that followed the incident, Pavlensky noted that the action was "a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of modern Russian society."<sup>137</sup> Only a few years later, in 2016, Russian filmmaker Kirill Serebrennikov would echo this image in his film *The Student* (*[М]Ученик*). In the film's final scene, a persecuted and manic biology teacher named Elena Krasnova nails her shoes to the hardwood floor of the institute from which she had just been fired. Stepping in these shoes, now nailed into the floor, Elena Krasnova shouts an emotional declaration to the school's staff. The film's final words are Krasnova's semi-coherent monologue in which she proclaims: "I'm here... I'm here because I belong here! And you don't! I'm not leaving here because... I belong here! I'm not leaving. I belong here. But he doesn't!"<sup>138</sup> The "he" she is referring to is Vanya, a schoolboy whose radical religious antics has resulted in her firing.

While Pavlensky's original action and its echo image in Serebrennikov's seem to be devoid of any of the markings of holy foolery, especially under the established historical-hagiographic definitions of the phenomenon, contemporary scholars of post-Soviet theology and society have begun to reconsider the holy fool in the postmodern landscape. These scholars and the fool's transformation and subsequent appropriation is the focus of the current chapter. With a postmodern reconsideration of the fool, specifically of his role in contemporary cinema and art,

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<sup>137</sup> Pavlensky & Walker, "Why I Nailed My Scrotum to Red Square", Guardian, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square>

<sup>138</sup> Serebrennikov, *The Student*, 1:52:04 - 1:53:01

this chapter will investigate several contemporary Russian films and the intersection of performance protest/artwork/actionism and the realm of contemporary cinema.

### **The Postmodern Influence**

Much of contemporary scholarship and the reinvigorated interest of *iurodstvo* is indebted to the foundational works of Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>139</sup> Of note is his theory of the carnivalesque and the carnivalization of literature which he explores in his books *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque references the medieval carnival, in all its grotesque and humorous manifestations, and he notes how several of its foundational principles have been applied in a literary mode. A carnival sense of the world represents a subversive liberation of the dominant hierarchical powers and systems. It is especially through laughter that the carnival “unifies and equalizes the participants” and overturns “the official order, establishing the temporary rule of those who laugh.”<sup>140</sup>

Bakhtin identifies the four major principles of a carnival sense of the world in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. These principles are: 1. Free and familiar contact among people, 2. Eccentricity, 3. Carnivalistic mesalliances, and 4. Profanation.<sup>141</sup> Immediately apparent here is a number of similarities between Bakhtin’s pillars of the carnivalesque and the historical-hagiographic models established by Ivanov and Fedotov. Firstly, both models share an emphasis on the free interaction of people. In Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, these interactions are brought about by the nature of the carnival as a physical exchange. The holy fool’s interactions

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<sup>139</sup> Hlebowciz, *A Holy Fool for Our Time?* 2015, 25.

<sup>140</sup> Kobets, “Lice in the Iron Cap: Holy Foolishness in Perspective” in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Slavica Publishers, 2011), 30.

<sup>141</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 123.

are seen through his “life among men,”<sup>142</sup> which according to Fedotov, doubles as both a form of extreme asceticism and as part of the fool’s theater. Secondly, both models share an emphasis of eccentricity, especially in relation to the grotesque and the scandalous “performances” readily seen. Finally, the carnival’s profanation shares ties with the fool’s established relationship with blasphemy, and frequent use of obscenities.<sup>143</sup>

In his later book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin continues his inquiry into the carnivalesque, and develops his theory of two cultures/worlds. The theory distinguishes the “lower” debased, carnivalesque strata of culture and uniform, hierarchical, and official “high culture.” While Bakhtin rarely references *iurodivy*,<sup>144</sup> Bodin notes that scholars later regarded “*iurodstvo* as belonging to the carnivalesque, low, reversed culture.”<sup>145</sup> This concept was generative for both modernist and postmodernist thinkers,<sup>146</sup> particularly in the “ambivalent relationship between these two cultures.”<sup>147</sup>

Aside from the works of Bakhtin, scholars have noted several other similarities between postmodernism/postmodern art and the phenomenon of *iurodstvo*. In particular, the two share several typological characteristics such as “anti-aestheticism, liminality, ambiguity and theatricalization.”<sup>148</sup> One of the first scholars to expand on the similarities between the two was

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<sup>142</sup> George Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind Volume II*, 321.

<sup>143</sup> These debased actions are seen in the hagiographic literatures of the Byzantian Saints Symeon and Basil.

<sup>144</sup> An exception of this case is found in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. In an analysis of *Notes from the Underground* in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin specifically references a moment where the Underground Man is critiquing himself. Bakhtin notes that in the Underground Man’s discourse with himself is “pointedly cynical, calculatedly cynical, yet also anguished” (231). For this, Bakhtin claims that the Underground man is “playing the holy fool, for foolishness is indeed a sort of form, a sort of aestheticism.” It is here where the holy fool begins its translation into the secular sphere. In this case the holy fool is defined by a critical discourse with the Other.

<sup>145</sup> Bodin, “Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture” in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*(Slavica Publishers, 2011), 353-354.

<sup>146</sup> Bodin, “Holy Foolishness in Russia”, 209

<sup>147</sup> Bodin, *Language Canonization and Holy Foolery: Studies in Postsoviet Russian Culture and the Orthodox Tradition* (Stockholm Univ., 2009), 209

<sup>148</sup> Hlebowciz, *A Holy Fool for Our Time?*, 25

Russian philosopher Tatiana Goricheva. In her 1991 book, *Православие и постмодернизм*, Goricheva ultimately concludes that “Юродивый - самая современная, постмодернистская форма святости (The holy fool is the most contemporary, postmodern form of holiness).”<sup>149</sup> Besides from Goricheva, many other postmodern scholars such as Mark Lipovetsky,<sup>150</sup> Sofia Malenkii, Peter Phan, Viacheslav Kuritsyn, and Sergey A. Medvedev tease out the connection between these two features. Mark Lipovetsky maintains some of the most radical interpretations on this relationship. In his book *Russian Postmodernism*, the scholar equates the contemporary postmodern author to the holy fool:

Юродивый, как и писатель-постмодернист, вступает в диалог с хаосом, стремясь среди грязи и похабства найти истину. “Благодать почиет на худшем,” - вот что имеет в виду юродивый.

The holy fool, like the postmodern writer, enters into a dialogue with chaos, striving to find truth among the dirt and obscenities. “Grace will rest on the worst,” that’s what the holy fool means.<sup>151</sup>

Lipovetsky’s quote seemingly refers to the Bakhtinian theory of two cultures.<sup>152</sup> In his association of the fool with chaos and filth, has the fool is part of the “lower” strata that is in constant dialogue with the “higher” ordered and hierarchical culture. While Lipovetsky’s very fluid interpretation and invocation of the holy fool isn’t a widely held stance, there is an element of his definition that is highlighted by other postmodern thinkers. Lipovetsky’s conjecture that the holy fool is a character that finds truth in the filth is quite similar to the musings found in

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<sup>149</sup> Goricheva, *Православие и Постмодернизм*, (Leningrad: Publishing House of Leningrad University, 1991), 57. Also, of note from Goricheva is a note she makes about the Schizophrenia movement of the USSR’s 50s and 60s, where educated circles loved the term schizophrenia and saw it as a counter-culture resistance. Goricheva noting the inherent “revolutionary” potential of mental illness. Bodin sees this as a very Russian understanding of mental illness especially noting the connections with the phenomenon of holy foolery.

<sup>150</sup> It is in Lipovetsky’s book *Russian Postmodernism: Essays on Historical Poetics* where the author essentially equates postmodernism and *iurodstvo*.

<sup>151</sup> Lipovetsky, *Русский Постмодернизм* (Publishing House of Ekaterinburg University, 1997), 166. Lipovetsky’s reading is specifically in relation to Venedikt Erofeev’s novel *Москва-Петушки*, but will be especially relevant in this chapter’s discussion of film and its relationship with performance protest/art.

<sup>152</sup> Bodin, “Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture”, 359.

Sofia Malenkii's "Попытка Юродства Как Одна Из Стратегий Современной Культуры." Here the author describes the holy fool in a similar way, stating:

В условиях, когда профанируется идея Бога, церкви, веры юродство становится формой обретения сакрального. В мире симулякров настолько невозможно трудно столкнуться с реальностью, что становится необходимым преодоление всех общепринятых норм, условностей, даже морали, чтобы обрести «вкус жизни», ощущение реальности.

In the conditions where the idea of God the church and faith have been profaned, holy foolishness becomes a form of gaining/reaching the sacred. In the world of simulacra(s), it is so difficult to be faced with reality, that it becomes necessary to overcome all generally excepted norms, conventions, even morals, in order to gain "a taste of life," a feeling of reality.<sup>153</sup>

In play here is a discussion of simulacrum/simulation, as developed by the French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard,<sup>154</sup> and the ever-increasing fragmentation and falsification of current mediatized society. However, like Lipovetsky, Malenkii conceptualizes the fool especially through his ability of "reaching the sacred," or the undeniable truths of this world. Aside from this similarity, Malenkii's work provides an analysis of the relationship between postmodern art and holy foolery. However, unlike Lipovetsky, Malenkii takes a more balanced approach in her analysis of *iurodstvo* in the postmodern period. She writes:

Герой современной культуры не представляет всего комплекса юродства, он лишь попытка обретения, приближения к этому явлению. И все же именно через призму концепции юродства, как нам кажется, можно приблизиться к пониманию многих современных произведений.

The hero of contemporary culture does not represent all the complexity of holy foolishness, he is only an attempt at gaining, at approaching this phenomenon. But still, it's through the prism of holy foolishness, as it seems to us, that we can approach an understanding of many contemporary works.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Malenkii, "Попытка Юродства Как Одна Из Стратегий Современной Культуры", Anthropology.ru, 2006, <http://anthropology.ru/ru/text/malenkih-si/popytka-yurodstva-kak-odna-iz-strategiy-sovremennoy-kultury>.

<sup>154</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>155</sup> Malenkii, "Попытка Юродства", 2006.

It is here that she disputes the scholars who embrace the conflation of the postmodern and the phenomenon of holy foolery. In her eyes, holy foolery can be utilized as an evaluative arm in the analysis of postmodern works, much as how psychoanalytical theory has found second life in the realm of film theory. She addresses the “elephant in the room” through her observation that the innate complexity central to the fool (that being his religious core) is completely missing from postmodern art. In an indirect sense, she identifies that the holy fool has been reduced to a façade, a pure aesthetic in the postmodern period, almost as if it has been “reduced to a thin rubber mask to be worn whenever needed, by anyone.”<sup>156</sup> Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that holy foolery is a premodern phenomenon which has seen its share of transformation and reconsideration in the postmodern period. Following these changes leads us to an increasingly confused and fragmented figure that is both a means of obtaining the sacred and lacking in any innate authenticity or moral clarity.

### ***The Secular Iurodivy and the Question of Simulacra (Appropriation)***

Both the aforementioned scholars Mark Lipovetsky and Sofia Malenkii make a connection between the phenomena of holy foolery and philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and simulation. For these postmodern scholars, the holy fool represents the possibility of “obtaining the sacred” in the “world of simulacra.” Interestingly enough, these two scholars are not the only thinkers to notice a similarity between holy foolery and simulation. However, it is at this contentious point that a central debate arises. Is the holy fool a translational figure that subverts the simulacra of this world, or is it a figure that finds itself perpetuating the ever-

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<sup>156</sup> Piccolo, “From Stylization to Parody: The Paradigm of Holy Foolishness in Contemporary Russian Performance Art” in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Slavica Publishers, 2011), 375.

expanding simulation of this world? In essence, does the holy fool's existence in the postmodern context represent another false layer of reality (due to its new format as a secular figure defined by its carnivalesque interactions with hierarchical structures, and not by the traditional intense ascetic spirituality achieved through kenosis) that is only perpetuating the simulacra we find ourselves immersed in, or is the holy fool a figure who is able to cut through the simulacrum of this world represented by his relationship with otherworldly wisdom and truth?

In her text *Современная культура и православие*, Russian theologian Olesia Nikolaeva strongly rejects the sweeping connections made by Russian postmodernists linking holy foolery to postmodern performances. She starts her argument by addressing the holy fool's feigned madness and his kenotic element, stating: "holy fools took upon themselves the feat of being insane in the world out of great humility, not only in order to hide their own holiness, but also in order to avoid human praise and worship, but also so that, they become persecuted, contemptible and outcast."<sup>157</sup> The emphasis here is a stress on the repression of vainglory central to traditional hagiographic models of the figure. Nikolaeva then contrasts the *iurodivy*'s principal lack of pride to the postmodern performer who "strives to be noticed and noted" born from the "autocratic proud intent to change the spontaneous course of the world, to change the organic fabric of life to an artificial one, to distort the world of God."<sup>158</sup> Additionally, she claims that these performances are devoid of the spiritual meaning and purpose central to the fool and that "unfolding the whimsical packing of the performance risks not finding anything in it besides itself," essentially "a means of self-affirming its builders."<sup>159</sup> Here, Nikolaeva registers her main source of dissent. It is her belief that the postmodernists have perverted the model of *iurodstvo* and have tried to

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<sup>157</sup> Nikolaeva, "Современная Культура и Православие", ABC of Faith, 1999, <https://azbyka.ru/sovremennaya-kultura-i-pravoslavie> (translation by Colby Santana).

<sup>158</sup> Nikolaeva, "Современная Культура и Православие", 1999.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

force two irreconcilable features into a (harmonious) unity. She defiantly proclaims that “The kingdom not of this world, which the holy fools preach, and the world of postmodern simulacra cannot touch.”<sup>160</sup>

In essence, there is once again a contested junction point between the realms of postmodernism and *iurodstvo*. Central to this contested juncture is the inescapable question of faith. It is apparent that postmodern scholars and thinkers have analyzed the premodern phenomenon of *iurodstvo* as a fluid category that has been “refracted, used and transformed in postmodern and postmodernistic Russian culture.”<sup>161</sup> For them, what lies in the center of the fool, his chief motivation, is auxiliary to his purpose as a revelatory and generative carnival figure. Postmodernism’s dismissal of metanarratives explains the shifted focus away from valuing religious inquiry and thought. More conservative theologians and scholars have held true to a static model that emphasizes the *iurodivy*’s spiritual missions as more important than his outward antics. Almost all scholars quoted here have made note of the similar typological aesthetics in play between postmodernism and *iurodstvo*, but this essential question of the fool’s core, be it religious or auxiliary, remains irreconcilable.

What then, is to be made of the modern fool (if he even exists), and how do these theoretical approaches to the matter manifest in specific forms? Both Darja Filippova and Sylwia Hlebowicz are scholars on holy foolery — specifically in its relation to contemporary Russian performance protestors and groups (forces inspired by postmodern *actionism* especially spawning from the Moscow Conceptualists). Having tackled many of these same theoretical debates, both scholars independently reach a conclusion that finds a middle ground between the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Bodin, *Language Canonization and Holy Foolery*, 191.



classical theorists and postmodernists. In her conference presentation *Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation*, Darja Filippova's argues that several of Russia's contemporary political performance groups "appropriate religious aesthetics to engage in a form of institutional critique within Orthodoxy."<sup>162</sup> Hlebowciz describes a similar phenomenon occurring in her thesis *A Holy Fool of Our Time?* The thesis focuses on the artistic utterances of a single Russian performance protester, Peter Pavlensky. While discussing the influential Blue Noses Group and their relation to Pavlensky, Hlebowicz recognizes a consistent trend where "the paradigm of *iurodstvo* was used as a stylization or a parody" in these figures' acts.<sup>163</sup> She consequently concludes that in this way "*iurodstvo* was used as a simulacrum, understood as a 'mere image of a certain phenomenon devoid of its substance.'"<sup>164</sup> In this light, the contemporary "fool" is not a person but rather a mask that is readily utilized and worn.

The postmodern reorientation of the fool separates the *iurodivy* from his theater. As noted above, one of the main arguments against holy foolery being a postmodern device was postmodernism's empty core that is devoid of religious motivation. However, if the phenomenon is distilled into a sense of stylization or aesthetic (façade), it is inherently without any core besides from the goals of the individual(s) behind the mask. The modern fool uses the *iurodivy*'s tools for a different non-spiritual purpose, generally for their profound potential for (hierarchical) critique and resistance.<sup>165</sup> Though Hlebowicz and Filippova focus on political performance,

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<sup>162</sup> Filippova, "Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation - the Holy Fool Tradition in Post-Soviet Political Performance Art", 2015, 6.

<sup>163</sup> Hlebowciz, *A Holy Fool for Our Time?*, 80.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> In this sense deeming them "holy fools" might be inappropriate. However, due to the figure's widespread acknowledgment and importance in Russian culture, anyone acting along the lines of a holy foolish behavioral code is recognized by the regular viewer, who is unfamiliar with its theological theory. The line between mask of holy foolish and the true holy fool becomes especially blurry from the outsider perspective who isn't privy to the character's inner ruminations.

something addressed in greater detail in the next chapter, their work is applicable to several Russian postmodern films that share similarly ambiguous moral universes.

### **The Student**

The works of Kirill Serebrennikov are often defined by their exceedingly experimental and abstract qualities. Besides the works mentioned below, the director's catalogue of television shows and films are laced with elements of absurdism and visual experimentation. While the Russian director is probably best known for his politically motivated arrest in 2020,<sup>166</sup> he is also distinguished for both his theatrical and filmic productions. Outside of his arrest, the Serebrennikov has faced critique for his liberal opinions, specifically on question of gender and sexuality and the LGBTQ+ movement. Two of his films, *The Student* and *Playing the Victim*, depict characters related, in unexpected ways, to the subject of this chapter. We'll begin our discussion on the cinematic realization of postmodern mask of holy foolery with his 2016 film *The Student* ([М]Ученик).<sup>167</sup>

*The Student*, was originally based on a German play titled "Martyr," that was then adapted into a Russian play with the same director, character names, and title of the film. Serebrennikov's Russian adaptation of German playwright Marius Von Mayenberg takes very few liberties in its retelling of the original work. In an in interview with *Borrowing Tape*, the director addresses the similarities between the two works:

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<sup>166</sup> Kramer, "Prominent Russian Director Is Convicted of Embezzlement", New York Times, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/world/europe/kirill-serebrennikov-russian-director-embezzlement.html>

<sup>167</sup> An interesting footnote here on the English translation of the film's Russian title. The base word "Ученик" translates as "student, disciple, or apprentice." However, with the addition of the (М) at the word's beginning, the word becomes the word "Мученик," which translates to "martyr." This new title is the same as the German play it's based on.

The film is adapted from an original play by Marius von Mayenburg that I saw in Berlin. I asked him to send me the play, and having read it, I thought to myself that this is incredibly interesting, because it's exactly the situation in Russia. How did he know and manage to capture this so precisely? Marius is one of the best playwrights in the world at the moment, in my eyes. He has the ability to see the future. In Germany, this play doesn't seem as provocative as in Russia. For us, it is our reality.<sup>168</sup>

Serebrennikov's contention that the original plot of *The Student* is more relevant to Russia than it is to Germany is probably the director's chief motivation in telling this story of what he sees as the corrupted religious zealotism in contemporary Russian society. With this in mind, I will provide a brief summary of the film.

*The Student* opens with a scene depicting Veniamin's mother's inquiry as to why he has been skipping gym sessions at school. Of all of Venya's mother's possible explanations for his behavior, she is ultimately surprised and bemused by his revelation that the "swimming classes are against [his] religion."<sup>169</sup> Although she initially ridicules his claim to faith, she ultimately writes him a note dismissing him from such classes. His main repudiation of these classes is that the schoolgirls have been wearing revealing bikinis that are against the words of the bible. We see Veniamin's response as the film quickly cuts to showing the pool during one of the swimming classes. Veniamin unsuccessfully attempts to convince Lidya, a popular schoolgirl, to stop being "provocative." After rejecting his demands, he dives into the pool fully clothed and stays there until rescued by the gym teacher. This first act of foolishness precipitates a committee being convened that includes the school's headmaster, Veniamin's mother, the gym teacher, as well as Elena Krasnova the school's biology teacher who is initially brought in to provide a psychological assessment but will eventually become a rival Venya.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Waters & Serebrennikov, "The Student – Interview with Film Director Kirill Serebrennikov", Borrowing Tape, <https://borrowingtape.com/interviews/the-student-qa-director-kirill-serebrennikov>.

<sup>169</sup> Serebrennikov, *The Student*, 05:03

<sup>170</sup> A priest also joins the committee later in the film.

While the different members of the school community argue and debate over Venya, a portrait of Putin hangs above them all. This portrait of Putin that hangs in the school headmaster's office is a sign linking the school's bureaucratic structure to that of Russia's government. Totalitarianism presides over the film's institutions and there also exists a problematic unification of church and state in the Russian system. The school's headmaster makes sweeping decisions, often taking the side of Venya and the school's priest, even if these positions carry antisemitic attitudes and illogical reasoning. With the committee's decision to ban suggestive swimming outfits, thanks to Venya's foolish protest, Venya's headlong descent into zealotism begins.

This pool scene constitutes Venya's first truly "foolish" act. In it, Venya represents a feigned insanity (if not outright inanity). His act of diving in the pool while fully clothed is inherently nonsensical, but hidden in it is a spiritual critique of his classmates. Venya's action is in protest of the school lenient rules on "promiscuous school" wear, and they are motivated by his strong religious sentiments and "teachings." Ultimately, his critique is heard by the school board, which brings about change in the form of stricter sanctions on swimwear. This transactional relationship of insane acts and the spiritual/moral objectives they serve to promote or highlight is a diluted version of holy foolery. Missing in this transaction is the holy fool's somber ascetic qualities or his innocent simple-mindedness. But while Venya's relationship with holy foolery is complexly layered, we can already see that the character represents the fool's revelatory capacity as emphasized by his carnivalesque confrontation with hierarchy.

Venya's foolish acts are numerous without the film, with many of them occurring in Elena Krasnova's biology classroom. While Veniamin's and Elena's rivalry intensifies, so too does the student's foolish acts. Each of his numerous acts are worthy of their own analysis, but,

in short, they all resemble the stereotypical transactional relationship of a fool's insane acts, and their revelatory capacity. In one such scene, Venya strips naked<sup>171</sup> and parades around the room in response to a sexual education lesson on how to properly put on condoms. In another case, the class finds itself talking about Darwin's theory of evolution. Veniamin responds to "secular blasphemy" by wearing an ape suit and climbing desks and shelves pretending to be a monkey. While some actions do not occur in Krasnova's classroom (such as when he nails up a homemade cross in the school's music hall), the conflict between the two figures, underscored by foolish acts, is central to the film's plot. These characters' antagonism is further perpetuated by the school administration, whose conservative beliefs align far more with Venya's preaching than with Krasnova's liberal beliefs on subjects such as feminism, evolution, and homosexuality. It is in response to their budding rivalry that Elena herself becomes frenziedly invested in the Bible, spending all her time reading scripture in order to be able to argue with Venya, who has himself weaponized the same scripture.

In his religious quest, Veniamin meets Grigoriy Zaytsev, a physically disabled schoolboy who soon becomes enthralled with Venya. After Venya saves him from a barrage of bullies, Grigoriy begins following Venya as an apostle. This sworn dedication to the young zealot is later explained when it is revealed though (though wasn't very hidden in the first place) that Grigoriy has developed a crush on Venya, which the latter is unaware of. Veniamin's motivations bring Grigoriy "under his wings" isn't so pure as it seems. Veniamin describes his relationship with Grigoriy to his mother, stating that the pure boy is "not a friend, he's a cripple."<sup>172</sup> In that same dinner conversation, Veniamin expresses that Grigoriy's presence is only realized for the

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<sup>171</sup> Holy fools and nakedness have long-been associated. Dating back to Symeon and Andrew, holy fool's nakedness either represent an anti-prideful dismissal of the material world (clothes as material wealthy), a furthering of bodily torture according to ascetic principals, or simply the emphasis of the fool's body in all his performances.

<sup>172</sup> Serebrennikov, *The Student*, 49:44

purposes of saving his own soul and following scripture: "When you give dinner, don't invite your friends or your brothers or rich neighbors, in case they invite you in return and you are repaid. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind."<sup>173</sup> Ironically, Veniamin is in the process of doing exactly what he is preaching against — that is, giving a meal and hoping to be repaid for it. However, instead of material wealth, Veniamin is in pursuit of spiritual wealth. Epitomized in this scene is Veniamin's unique relationship with holy foolery. Veniamin represents an inversion of the holy fool's typical antics: he embodies a feigned *morality*, and what seems to be a pursuit of vainglory. Furthermore, one could inquire into the character's true sanity, as his sudden impetus to radical faith as well as his possible religious hallucinations could be signs of deeper mental health issues. Ultimately, this is but one example through which Serebrennikov problematizes the spirituality and morality of his central character.

Continuing with the film summary, Venia's radical faith and preaches soon become popular throughout the school. Venia's acts garner the attention of the school's priest, who unsuccessfully tries to convince Venia to pursue a career in the Orthodox Church. What's more, Lydia, the popular schoolgirl from the beginning of the film, is seduced by Venia and she joins the protagonist's quickly growing clique. Venia's growing veneration leads the characters down the path towards an increasingly radicalized faith. Veniamin's faith eventually reaches the point of delusion, epitomized in the scenes where Veniamin unsuccessfully attempts to perform the miracle of healing Grigory's crippled leg. These scenes are also significant as they portray

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 50:03 – 50:19

Grigoriy's growing feelings for Venia. In one such leg-healing scene, our protagonists' classmates discover this bizarre ritual and mock the boys for being homosexual.

It is at this point in the characters' relationship that Grigory hatches the plan to sabotage the biology teacher's moped so that she might be killed in an accident. Venya loves the idea, and this conversation leads to Grigory getting crowned as his disciple. Grigory sees this as an invitation to kiss Veniamin, who is enraged and perturbed by the homoerotic act. In response to this so-called betrayal, Veniamin murders Grigory on the spot. The film ends with Veniamin and his mother coming forward to the administrative board in protest of Elena Krasnova. It is here after the board makes fun of Krasnova that Venya claims that the biology teacher sexually assaulted him. The teacher storms out of the room and shortly after returns to nail herself to the floor as discussed above.

*The Student* is far from a stereotypical depiction of holy foolery. While this paper has already covered Venya's foolish acts, there still exists a question of supposed spirituality as well as the other typological characteristics of the *iurodivy* tradition. Primarily, Venya is defined by his carnivalesque relationship with the film's hierarchical and bureaucratic school system. However, besides that, Venya's foolishness is itself far from typical. Instead, Venya employs the mask of holy foolishness in an inverted manner. Briefly returning to my stated definition of holy foolery as provided in the introduction, Venya matches the broad strokes of this model. Venya utilizes feigned insanity to "reveal" or expose moral/spiritual questions within the school institution. Venya is also positioned outside of the system in his form of critique. However, Venya's actions aren't to preserve the purity of his soul, but rather in service of his vanity. The reflexive element of Venya's foolishness operates as a form of anti-holy foolery. His foolishness works to build up his pride rather than diminish it. In a critical scene, the school priest brings

Venya's attention to the fact that Venya's zealotism is, in fact, his "pride talking," and that he's "possessed by demons, demons!"<sup>174</sup> While *The Student* utilizes a holy fool to create a critique of Russia's political institutions, it accomplishes this mission a subversive fashion. In crafting the anti-holy fool Veniamin, Serebrennikov critiques Russian autocracy and Orthodoxy in a satirical, layered, and even postmodern fashion. This postmodern element even extends into the film's unique construction, a question to which we will return in more detail below.

### **Playing the Victim**

Kirill Serebrennikov's other relevant film, *Playing the Victim*, sees a similarly dynamic lead character in a modern reimagination of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The film's protagonist is a 30-year-old university dropout who now assists the police in murder reconstruction. The comical but tortured character acts the part of the "victim" in these reconstructions, as a means of proving the validity of the suspects' confessions/denials. Most importantly, these reconstructions are filmed by the police department for the purpose of keeping records. Hence, the film is composed of a mix of these "meta" reconstruction scenes filmed in the first-person format, and the underlying traditional narrative film that connects these scenes. The film also contains several animated segments that intend to show Valya's rapid descent into madness. The film opens with one such "meta" scene that depicts a suspect reenacting the murder of his girlfriend in a portable outhouse.

These "meta" scenes are quite interesting as they represent a sort of simulacra of the events they intend to portray. The reconstructions are inherently foolish and comical as a

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 48:01



combination of Valya's nonserious antics, the police chief's horrible luck, and the clips' horrible recordings. They also often don't present the real truth of the events they intend to depict (more on this below). Ultimately, these scenes are ridiculous in nature, and greatly contribute to the film's postmodern flavor.

After the movie's first "meta" scene, the viewer learns more about Valya, our holy-foolish-like protagonist, and his complicated family portrait. Valya lives with his widowed mother, who is entertaining a relationship with Valya's uncle (the brother of his deceased father). There is also Olya, Valya's romantic partner with whom he is shown to have a troubled and atypical relationship. In the beginning of the film, Valya has a nightmare in which his deceased father appears and reveals to him that he was murdered by his own brother, Valya's uncle. This revelation sends our main character down a spiraling path of madness in which reality itself becomes confused and fractured.

Valya's progressive descent into insanity is made apparent through the "meta" storylines that make up the murder reconstructions. Although initially Valya is quiet and slightly comedic, the character becomes increasingly challenging and abrasive. One such murder reconstruction takes place in a pool; notably Valya is deathly afraid of water. Here, Valya presents his first real conflict with the strait-laced police captain played by Vitali Khayev. Due to Valya's missing swim trunks, the officers are forbidden from entering the pool and are forced to recreate the murder at the poolside. Instead of explaining his fear of water, Valya proceeds to make a mockery of the reconstruction, as does the simpleminded suspect, both of whom drive the police officer to anger. After the pool scene, Valya has an exchange with a police officer, in which he almost convinces the officer to release the murder suspect and condemning him at the final moment right when he is about to be freed. Valya begins by inquiring about rookie officer Seva.

Valya quickly learns that Seva is looking to become a university student and asks the officers if he is “looking for a high paying, prestigious job?”<sup>175</sup> Laughing along, Seva confirms Valya’s suspicions. It is here that Valya presents Seva with what seems to be a choice. Valya attempts to bribe Seva through the captured criminal Takhirov. Valya tells Seva that Takhirov is a “devoted genie” who will “make all your wishes come true if you set him free,” and even going so far as suggesting that Takhirov will give the officer “his white car with a heap of cash.”<sup>176</sup> Takhirov, going along with Valya, ultimately convinces Seva to set him free. Pulling the key out of his pocket, Seva is about to set Takhirov free when Valya suddenly slaps the key out of his hand. Seva is confused and questions Valya over the whole matter. Valya responds by claiming he set up the whole episode so that Seva would “get the essence of the moral” as it’s “so easy to stumble” and he didn’t want that happening to the rookie cop.<sup>177</sup> In a odd way Valya both highlights the greed of the police institution, but also helps guide Seva away from the path of bribery and corruption. The relationship between the two men, considering the theatricalization of the episode as well as slight inanity that came with it, is a parallel to the essence of holy foolery.

Throughout the film, Valya continues to operate as a revelatory character that engages with others in a provocative and divisive manner. While this behavior might take place between Valya and his uncle, or a gullible police officer, his performative moral lessons are sprinkled through the narrative. Overall, the flow of the film is constantly jagged, frantically bouncing from traditional cinema, the “meta” murder reconstructions, and even animated segments that illustrate Valya’s declining mental health.

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<sup>175</sup> Serebrennikov, *Playing the Victim*, 57:02

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 57:22 - 58:34

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 59:32 - 59:55

The film's climax happens after a tense murder reconstruction gone awry in a Japanese restaurant. After questioning the killer's motives, the police captain has a form of nihilistic breakdown in which he expresses his utter exhaustion with the state of the world. As part of the captain's breakdown, he demands the restaurant staff to bring him the infamous poisonous Japanese puffer fish. Valya, a spectator of the whole ordeal, makes note of this poisonous Japanese fish that is deadly if not prepared correctly. In the next scene, Valya is shown feeding this poisonous fish to his unsuspecting family, killing them all in the process. The film's final scenes show one final murder reconstruction, but this time Valya is in the place of the murder, not of the murdered. After the reconstruction, Valya finds himself in a form of altered reality, stuck at sea with his father in a boat. This final scene is interesting as it depicts a traumatic event that happened to Valya in his childhood but is presented in the present moment. The black and white filter sticks out and suggests an element of insanity or meta-reality. These colors when utilized in the film's animated sections serve as a visual representation of Valya's descent into madness. Valya's father also is a symbol of this descent and his ghost coming to Valya is the catalyst for the film's events. This ending finally unites Valya with his father, but this reunion is bittersweet as they are ultimately unified by trauma and death. While it is uncertain as to what this ending exactly suggests (be that Valya fully succumbing to his madness or even his possible death) it is portrayed in a completely metafictional and layered fashion.

Both these films represent characters that, at least on a surface level, represent the mask of holy foolery. Just as in the realm of performance art and postmodernism, these films represent a stylized foolery that is devoid of the complete spiritual will of the historical-hagiographic

*iurodivy*.<sup>178</sup> Alina Birzache names this “appropriation of foolish behavior” in either film or art as “*iurodstvovanie*.” *Iurodstvovanie* denotes a “distinct behavioral pattern having formal qualities of holy foolishness but lacking its substance.”<sup>179</sup> This term is essentially interchangeable with my previously defined “mask of holy foolery,” which focuses on the violent separation of the fool’s aesthetic categories from his spiritual motivations. In the cases of *The Student* and *Playing the Victim*, the mask is visible and apparent through the film’s various realities.

### **Film’s Three Looks and the Many Layers of Irony**

Essential to unpacking either of these films is a discussion on the cinematic tools with which Serebrennikov creates his worlds. Chief among these tools is the rapidly changing perspectives the director utilizes to present the narratives. As noted above, both films have segments that can be described as “recorded acts.” I define a recorded act as a scene where the camera assumes the position of a physical lens within the film’s diegesis rather than an omnipresent and objective viewing of the scene.

In *The Student*, the recorded acts appear as recordings of Venya’s foolish performances shown from the perspective of Lidya’s phone. These scenes are objectively understood as being recorded features within their own films due to a series of clues from the director. An example to illustrate my argument is the entire scene from 35:45 - 35:56, where Venya is stripping naked in Krasnova’s classroom. The first thing of note in this scene is its drastically different aspect ratio compared to the shots before. The previous shots utilized the whole screen, while this shot only

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<sup>178</sup> *The Student* is complex, as Venya’s foolishness is religiously motivated, but, having complicated the motivations of his faith, the character is shown not to represent the holy fool’s God-like purity. The best representation of this is his inability to perform miracles because of his tainted soul.

<sup>179</sup> Birzache, *The Holy Fool in European Cinema*, (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 62.

uses a small box within the frame. Furthermore, the scene utilizes a grainier film filter, one reminiscent of a cheap phone camera. The video itself is shot from a first person perspective and is notably shaky and frantic. Finally, it is the shot after this unique perspective that the viewer can directly see Lidya filming Venya on her phone camera. It is with these context clues that the viewer can deduce the fact that this shot, and those similar to it, are recorded “meta” scenes that display a perspective from within the film’s diegesis. When it comes to *Playing the Victim*, Serebrennikov utilizes this same technique, albeit in a more apparent form. The murder reconstructions in this film are all shown from the perspective of a video camera from within the film’s diegesis. This time, that perspective is even aided with visual markers of the camera’s battery, timestamp, and more.

Serebrennikov’s stylistic choice of a subjective camera that directly points the viewers’ attention to the presence of such a camera fundamentally changes how the viewer engages with such scenes. It is generally the goal of traditional cinema to make the viewer ignore the presence of the camera or suggest any inquiry as to whose perspective the camera is appropriating.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, the use of a subjective perspective within a film is generally employed in order to create within the viewer a greater sense of identification with the film’s events.<sup>181</sup> Here, Lidya’s camera footage as well as the recorded murder reconstructions work to achieve the complete opposite. Rather than heightened identification, the viewer is subjected to a noticeable detachment from the film’s events and perspective.

Serebrennikov’s choice presents an interesting quandary, especially in relation to Laura Mulvey’s influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In her essay, Laura Mulvey,

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<sup>180</sup> Brinton, “Subjective Camera or Subjective Audience?” (Hollywood Quarterly, 1947).

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

feminist scholar and film critic, establishes a groundbreaking new perspective on film theory — specifically, her focus on the male gaze and the tools with which a film utilizes to present a political perspective. In her essay, the scholar notes that:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator,) fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth.<sup>182</sup>

In her essay, Mulvey notes that films can create subversive political messaging that is obstructed for the viewer through a film's presentation. Cinema's claim to being apolitical allows for its effectiveness in subliminal messaging.<sup>183</sup> In relation to the films of Serebrennikov, how are we meant to understand a film that deliberately creates a distancing affect within its viewer?

It is here where the holy fool — specifically the postmodern mask of the fool — comes into play. I argue that both Veniamin and Valya share resemblance to the postmodern performer in their appropriation of the religious aesthetic of *iurodstvo*. Firstly, both characters represent the Bakhtinian conflict between the dichotomized carnivalesque and hierarchical cultures. In both films, our protagonist is an eccentric, grotesque, and revelatory figure, put into conflict with Russian society's hierarchical institutions — whether it is *The Student's* juvenile college that serves as a representation for the greater Russian state, or *Playing the Victim's* mockery of the Russian police. Secondly, both films are constructed in a postmodern fashion, especially considering their parodistic elements, fragmented nature, and the central facets of mediatization and simulacra. These respective film's main characters find themselves in an interesting relation

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<sup>182</sup> Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Feminisms, 1975), 815-816.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

with the mask of holy foolery. In an interesting way, holy foolery is tied to the fragmented realities of each film's recorded acts.

Both these film's recorded acts and the phenomenon of holy foolery emphasize spectatorship above all else. In the case of *iurodstvo*, the general ambiguity of the figure forces the spectator to "decide for themselves whether the simpleton (fool) represents a genuine prophet who possesses the divine truth. . . or is just a professional buffoon."<sup>184</sup> However, in a filmic format, who specifically is in this dialogue with the fool? As was the case with *The Island*, that burden of spectatorship is laid on the shoulders of the characters in the film as well as the film viewer (layered spectatorship). As discussed in the first chapter, both the characters and the viewers are provoked by the holy fool Father Anatoly, but only the viewer is exposed to his pure heart and intentions that were behind his mask of madness. In these two films, scenes that utilize a subjective camera presented through a technological medium establish the viewer's independent relationship with the holy-fool-like character. It is these fractal scenes, which exist on a parallel line of reality to the filmic events, which give the agency to the viewer to enter into an individual dialogue with the mask foolishness. Through the metafictional and postmodern construction of his films, specifically in the case of *The Student* and *Playing the Victim*, Serebrennikov disguises his critique of Russia's political institutions. Like the directors discussed previously in this thesis, Serebrennikov highlights the insanity of Russia's institutions through a holy fool-like character. For the director, this relationship is expressed through a filmic format. However, his unique construction of critique almost stretches his depiction of foolishness into the real world outside of his film. His use of recorded acts plays with the boundaries of reality and situate these holy fools as real and lived people in our world. This boundary between

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<sup>184</sup> Hlebowicz, *A Holy Fool for Our Time?*, 17-18

real and cinematic is only further complicated in the next chapter in Oleg Mavromatti's *No Place for Fools*.



## CHAPTER FOUR: IURODSTOVANIE IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CIVIL SOCIETY

*“In our performance we dared, without the Patriarch’s blessing, to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture and that of protest culture, thus suggesting to smart people that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch and Putin, that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia.”<sup>185</sup>*

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2012, five ski-mask adorned women entered Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ Our Savior and performed a guerilla-like version of their punk prayer, “Mother of God, Put Putin Away.” While four of the brightly dressed women bowed, danced, and crossed themselves on the church’s altar, another member of the protest/performance art group filmed the whole episode on a video camera. The chaotic nature of the performance was only enhanced by the various nuns and security guards who desperately attempt to remove the girls from their newly fashioned stage. After eventually being kicked out, the group would quickly upload a remixed video of the events on YouTube. The video featured clips from the cathedral, as well as the soundtrack of their punk prayer in its entirety. The prayer reads out:

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin. Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish him, we pray thee! Congregations genuflect, black robes brag gilt epaulettes, freedom's phantom's gone to heaven, gay Pride's chained and in detention. KGB's chief saint descends to guide the punks to prison vans. Don't upset His Saintship, ladies, stick to making love and babies. Crap, crap, this godliness crap. Crap, crap, this holiness crap! Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Be a feminist, we pray thee, be a feminist, we pray thee. Bless our festering bastard-boss. Let black cars parade the Cross. The Missionary's in class for cash. Meet him there, and pay his stash. Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin. Better believe in God, you vermin! Fight for rights, forget the rite – join our protest, Holy Virgin. Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin, Virgin Mary, Mother of God, we pray thee, banish him!<sup>186</sup>

Following the punk prayer, the group, operating under the name “Pussy Riot,” was launched onto the global stage. While their scornful critique of Putin’s Church-State relations was popular

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<sup>185</sup>Samutsevich & Sobchak, “Uncovered”, Snob Magazine, 2012 (Translation by D. Filippova).

<sup>186</sup> Pussy Riot, *Punk Prayer: Mother of God Putin Put!*, Cathedral of Christ the Savior, 2012.

with some, others saw the act as pure blasphemy.<sup>187</sup> This supposed “blasphemy” led to Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova being “arrested and indicted on the charge of felony hooliganism, a violation of Article 213 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.”<sup>188</sup> Ultimately, the group members were found guilty of this charge and were sentenced to two years in a Russian penal colony. After serving their sentence, the members of Pussy Riot continued their provocative and politically-charged antics up to the current day.

Outside of the group Pussy Riot, Article 213 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation has been frequently utilized by the Russian state against political performers and performance protest groups. The article outlaws “hooliganism,” “that is, a gross violation of the public order manifested in patent contempt of society and attended” specifically, in this case, “by reason of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred.”<sup>189</sup> Relevant to our study, Article 213 links together the likes of Pussy Riot, Petr Pavlensky, Oleg Mavromatti, and a whole host of Russian political performance protestors. These figures are similarly linked by their utilization of the mask of holy foolery (*Iurodstovanie*), and the appropriation of religious aesthetics in their works.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Keith M. Woodyard writes that many Russians saw the performance as “both blasphemous and criminal” with several witness reporting “being traumatized by Pussy Riot’s immodest dress, “devilish jerking,” and profane singing. (Woodyard 269). The group vehemently rejects this claim.

<sup>188</sup> Woodyard, “Pussy Riot and the Holy Foolishness of Punk” (Rock Music Studies, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2014.949555>

<sup>189</sup> “Russian Federation Criminal Code”, 1996, [https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Russian\\_Federation\\_Criminal\\_Code.pdf](https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Russian_Federation_Criminal_Code.pdf)

<sup>190</sup> While this specific mask argument stems from Darja Filippova’s conference paper “Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation: The Holy Fool Tradition in Post-Soviet Political Performance Art,” other scholars on the subject have utilized this language previously. Piccolo also discusses the mask of holy foolery in relationship to performance protest in *Holy Foolishness: New Perspectives*. There Piccolo notes how in “Symbolism and Futurism, *iurodstvo* then becomes a potential “mask” for the writer, until it is turned into a behavioral model for both character and writer during the Soviet era” (373-374). This same relationship materializes in Mavromatti’s work.

These actors and their actions are the subject of the current chapter, as in them we see a tangible realization of the postmodern mask of the holy fool. Furthermore, it is with these actors in mind that we will turn to an analysis of the 2015 documentary-fiction hybrid film *No Place for Fools* (*Дуракам здесь не место*) composed, edited and directed by one such performance protestor. In the end, these interactions and boundaries between political performance art and cinema will be blurred as seen through the phenomena of *iurodstvo*.

### **Moscow Actionism**

In order to analyze modern day Russian political performance art, we must first go back to the post-Soviet moment and the birth of Russia's actionist movement. Lauren Piccolo, in her article, *From Stylization to Parody: The Paradigm of Holy Foolishness in Contemporary Russian Performance Art*, covers the development of Russia's performance art emerging from the collapse of the USSR. Piccolo begins her study following the collapse of the Soviet totalitarian state, a period which she describes as a "creative vacuum." One of the numerous consequences of the Soviet collapse was the "subsequent ruin of Soviet totalitarian culture,"<sup>191</sup> whose reverberations were felt by numerous underground movements and groups. Piccolo cites Mark Lipovetsky in describing the literature and arts of the post-perestroika period as a chaotic "pandemic of madness, combined with end-of-the-century irrationalism, postmodernism, and the paradigm of *iurodstvo*."<sup>192</sup> As detailed above, Lipovetsky's stances and definitions of *iurodstovo* are among the most radical in the study of the phenomenon, with the scholar even considering

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<sup>191</sup> Piccolo, "From Stylization to Parody: The Paradigm of Holy Foolishness in Contemporary Russian Performance Art" in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Slavica Publishers, 2011), 375.

<sup>192</sup> Piccolo, *From Stylization to Parody*, 375

The Lipovetsky quote comes from his book *Russian Postmodernism (Russkii postmodernizm)* page 40.

postmodernism and *iurodstvo* interchangeable terms. However, his quote does illustrate Russia's immediate post-Soviet moment.

Continuing, Piccolo writes how the cultural/artistic void that was left by the collapse of the Soviet Union gave birth to a particularly extreme and violent response in the form of performance art.<sup>193</sup> This short-lived but immensely influential movement is known as Moscow Actionism. Initially Actionism came from a more wholesome drive: to revive the artist's "contact with the masses and to develop for the former a role that he had been deprived of in the 1990s, when even such temples of art as cinemas and museums were transformed into car dealerships and shops."<sup>194</sup> In order to re-establish himself, this contemporary artist "turns to (torturing) his own body" to express himself. However, this focus on the body, similarly to holy fools, quickly turned to an examination of "his own – at times even physical-suffering."<sup>195</sup>

Historically speaking, Moscow Actionism is closely linked to the Soviet avant-garde movement and "can be interpreted as a new chapter in the conceptual art of Moscow."<sup>196</sup> Movements like futurism, and groups like the Moscow conceptualists<sup>197</sup> were also relevant in the development of this new Russian movement.<sup>198</sup> Moscow Actionism's formal origins were established during perestroika when "young poets once again started to recite their verses in town squares."<sup>199</sup> However, in the post-Soviet space, readings were quickly

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<sup>193</sup> Piccolo, *From Stylization to Parody*, 376

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 377

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 378

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 377

<sup>197</sup> Filippova, "Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation", 6-7. Darja Filippova writes "Political performance art in Russia works through the direct inheritance of Moscow Conceptualism and is in conversation with radicalism around the world" (6-7). The Conceptualists and their ties to the avant-garde also relate back to *iurodstvo*'s postmodern arm with significant overlap between the two.

<sup>198</sup> These movements also have superficial similarities to the holy folly as established in the last chapter. Specifically, the Futurists' experimentation in linguistic symbolism through *Zaum* echo's the often-incoherent language of holy fools. The combination of grunts and whimpers are apparent in both.

<sup>199</sup> Piccolo, "From Stylization to Parody", 378

overshadowed by the scandal and provocation that occurred during them, especially influenced by groups like E.T.I. (*Ekspropriatsiia Territorii Iskusstva* — Expropriation of the Territory of Art). While the Moscow Actionism movement only lasted from 1991 – 1996, its influence spread to other Russian cities such as St. Petersburg, even reaching Ekaterinburg.

An analysis of Actionism's formative tendencies reveals several outward similarities between the two models. Firstly, the actionists' focus on the body as a communicative devices echoes several of the holy fool's ascetic devices. The holy fool's nudity is mocked by the actionist performer, as is his nudity. For the holy fool, nudity and torture of the flesh are part of his ascetic nature: both a serious dismissal of worldly pleasures and a kenotic emulation of the suffering of Christ. The contemporary performers' nudity and body torture aren't so much inwardly concerned as they are aspects of provocative spirit. The fool also shares a provocative nature which is intended to create moral and spiritual revelations in his spectator. The contemporary performer also utilizes this tool in his significantly theatricalized performance. The critiques leveraged by the holy fool and the actionist performer is the most similar attribute of these two models, as they both have several shared targets (such as institutionalized faith, political leaders, and hierarchical structure in general) that they hope to influence. This inversion of the holy fools' spiritual devices by the Russian actionist's performance is a realization of the mask of the holy fool discussed in the prior chapter. This *iurodstovanie* on the part of the performer utilizes the fool's generative carnival devices for his own political purposes, be they affiliated with religion or not.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Piccolo expands on this subject, writing: "The performances of the aktsionisty thus revived some elements of the *iurodstvo* paradigm: these elements nevertheless do not reflect the substance and value of the ascetic practice of *iurodstvo*. It seems, then, that the performances of the aktsionisty represent a conscious attempt to stylize the *iurodstvo* paradigm. Beyond the superficial level of their performances, at a more profound level, are numerous affinities with the behavior of the *iurodivye*." (382) This is the mask of the fool we have discussed in large.

Unlike previous discussions of the mask of the holy fool in postmodernism (*iurodstovanie*), Moscow's Actionist movement gave rise to several performers who utilized religious elements and aesthetics in their provocative performances. Russia's post-Soviet moment reintroduces religious discourse that was banned and made taboo in the Soviet era. While these performers don't represent the full spiritual breadth of either the historical-hagiographic *iurodivy* or *blazhenny*, their appropriation of these religious elements and aesthetics represents a hybrid touchpoint in between the two cultural phenomena. Darja Filippova discusses this exact subject in her paper "Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation - the Holy Fool Tradition in Post-Soviet Political Performance Art." In her introduction, the scholar writes:

The substance of my work is to show that as opposed to functioning against religion - as atheist activist and practitioners of a secular art that is persecuted by an increasingly religious state - Pussy Riot, alongside several other political performance artists in contemporary Russia- such as Alexander Brener, Oleg Kulik, Avdei Ter-Oganian, Oleg Mavromatti and Petr Pavlensky - appropriate religious aesthetics to engage in a form of institutional critique within Orthodoxy.<sup>201</sup>

In this construction of the mask of holy foolery, the contemporary activist critiques from within the institutional boundaries of Orthodox faith rather than from the position of the outsider. In the case of three of these performers (Pussy Riot, Petr Pavlensky, and Oleg Mavromatti), their established relationship with holy foolery is worthy of discussion. Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky have long been analyzed in their relation to holy foolery. Kerith Woodyard's work on Pussy Riot,<sup>202</sup> and Sływia Hlebowicz thesis on Petr Pavlensky,<sup>203</sup> are excellent analyses of the figures' stylistic relationship to *iurodstvo*. However the discussion below will focus especially on the legacy of Oleg Mavromatti and work on the boundaries of *iurodstvo*, and film.

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<sup>201</sup> Filippova, "Lineages of Blasphemy", 6.

<sup>202</sup> Woodyard, "Pussy Riot and the Holy Foolishness of Punk", 2014.

<sup>203</sup> Hlebowicz, *A Holy Fool for Our Time?*, 2015.

## Oleg Mavromatti

The Moscow Actionist performer Oleg Mavromatti was born in 1965, and currently lives in exile in the United States. During Russia's early period in the 1990s, Mavromatti was a significant part of several Moscow actionists groups, at one point serving as a significant member of E.T.I. During this time, Mavromatti was associated and was peers with artists such as Alexander Brener, Avdei Ter-Oganian and others.<sup>204</sup> Mavromatti is likely most well-known for his April 1<sup>st</sup> performance in 2002 titled "Do Not Believe Your Eyes." The performance consisted of the artist getting publicly crucified in Moscow. His wooden cross was placed in front of the Russian Ministry of Culture and faced the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Significantly, for both Pussy Riot and Oleg Mavromatti, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior represents the "de-facto unification of church and state in Russia"<sup>205</sup> brought about by Putin's presidency. Mavromatti's performance was made even more gruesome by the words "I am not the son of God" etched into the skin of his shirtless back. Mavromatti's action predated Pussy Riot's by twelve years. Unlike Pussy Riot, Mavromatti was charged "under Article 282/b for the ignition of national and religious hatred and fled to Bulgaria to resist imprisonment."<sup>206</sup>

Mavromatti would continue to utilize religious aesthetics in his performances in 2010 performance of "Ally/Foe." This performance was a thematic sequel to "Do Not Believe Your Eyes," as it had the online public decide his fate in his legal case against Russian authority. Mavromatti connected the online poll of his innocence/guilt to an electric chair in his room in Bulgaria. The electric chair would (effectively) kill the performer if the number of guilty votes doubled that of innocent votes. Luckily, Mavromatti survived the performance. Filippova looks

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<sup>204</sup> Filippova, "Lineages of Blasphemy and Revelation", 12.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

to Mavromatti's torturous performance in relation to the holy fool's kenotic dimension. In her analysis, Filippova likens Mavromatti to St Symeon as he "subjects the body to physical pain, self-emptying and public humiliation."<sup>207</sup> Mavromatti's two distinguished performances contain within themselves elements of provocation, a partial asceticism, the carnivalesque, and a supposed kenotic dimension. While the performer comes close to merging performance protest with Russia's long-standing tradition of holy foolery, this is only part of his relevance to this current work.<sup>208</sup>

### **No Place for Fools**

In 2015, in collaboration with PO98 and Boryana Rossa, Mavromatti developed the experimental pseudo-documentary film *No Place for Fools* (*Дуракам не здесь место*). Mavromatti labels the project as "post-cinema," as it is entirely composed of footage from YouTube that he has edited into a cinematic form. In the description of the project on his website, the now director Mavromatti writes, "some centuries ago, Peter the Great criminalized the holy fools. Today, with the help of Internet, I resurrect this holy fool tradition, to draw a critical portrait of Russia's darkest side."<sup>209</sup> Just below that, Mavromatti explains that in this film he intends to "draw a portrait of contemporary Russian society. The curious and controversial

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>208</sup> One final note on Mavromatti's own history of protest performance: Filippova notices that in the actions of Mavromatti there exists a form of "kenosis" alike St. Symeon's, due to the fact that "he subjects the body to physical pain, self-emptying and public humiliation" (Filippova, 14). While it can be debated as to how much of kenotic process is occurring, any extreme body torture recalls Russia's history of somber and terrifying asceticism.

<sup>209</sup> Mavromatti, "About No Place for Fools", OlegMavromatti.com, 2014, <https://olegmavromatti.com/sample-page/>



character I have created with this film is somewhat entertaining but also disturbing introduction to what capitalist Russia means to most of its citizens now.”<sup>210</sup>

The film’s experimental quality stems from its utilization of footage from the video blog of a real-life man, Sergey Astahov. Sergey is a well-known figure Russia’s virtual space and consciousness. His YouTube account is easily accessible,<sup>211</sup> and there even exists another documentary-like film in the same vein by Anatoli Ulyanov that was released in 2013.<sup>212</sup> So what then distinguishes this project as significant or relevant to the present work? It is in Mavromatti’s utilization of Astahov’s catalogue of videos that the director crafts a mask of holy foolery. As following Mark Lipovetsky’s contention that the contemporary author can also represent an aspect of holy foolery, Mavromatti’s political editing crafts his revelatory mask of Russia’s current state. In *No Place for Fools*, Mavromatti “enthrones the holy fool Astakhov where he once belonged, with his sacrificial status of a ludic mediator: between the circus and the government.”<sup>213</sup>

It would be difficult to give a plot summary of the film’s events, as its non-linear narrative is comprised of chaotic episodes, made more chaotic by Mavromatti’s editing. In general, Sergey Astahov is a mentally handicapped man within whom lies all of Russia’s current ideological contradictions. Astahov, the strong Orthodox believer and Putin activist is also defined by his homosexuality. This controversial combination of beliefs exists within our layered

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<sup>210</sup> Mavromatti, “About No Place for Fools”, 2014

<sup>211</sup> Sergey, User-bo3ee4cv6p, 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/@user-bo3ee4cv6p>

<sup>212</sup> That documentary can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX27UrlvrLQ>. The relationship between these two films sparked some conflict, with Ulyanov accusing Mavromatti of plagiarism. A claim the performance protestor/director refuted in claiming that he was aware of Ulyanov’s project before his, and didn’t even consider it a movie. (Mavromatti & Bolchek, “Киевский Торт для Путина”, 2015, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/26834359.html>)

<sup>213</sup> Panayotov, “The Cinematography of Agony: On Oleg Mavromatti's No Place for Fools”, Queen Mob's Teahouse, 2016, <https://queenmobs.com/2015/10/the-cinematography-of-agony-on-oleg-mavromattis-no-place-for-fools/>.

protagonist. What is significant to our analysis is Anatoly's constant dialogue with the viewer of the film. Unlike prior films studied here, there is no intermediate spectator of the holy fool. The viewer is Astahov's sole spectator, his only source of dialogue. Astahov's proximity to the camera, thanks to the film's vlog-style format, produces an uncomfortable feeling in the viewer. Despite this construction, isolation creeps through every aspect of the film. This is especially true considering Astahov's rantings often return to his ongoing isolation. This isolation, however, quickly turns from comedic and pathetic to something genuinely horrifying.

No Place for Fools starts out innocently enough. The opening few videos depict Sergey cooking sausages and reciting his poetry and songs. However, the film soon flips to showing images of explosions, suicides, and death, which have Sergey's dialogues on revolution and God superimposed onto them. Of Mavromatti's political editing choices, one specific device stands out. The director often utilized footage of death and destruction alongside Astahov's long monologues.

Interestingly, these videos are played in reverse. What starts out as a dead body on the pavement or a destroyed building is shown to almost magically restore itself to its initial condition. As the film progresses, more and more of these disturbing videos of death and destruction are included. This choice creates in the movie an apocalyptic feel, especially as Astahov's monologues transform from sausages and love to discussions of loneliness and the antichrist. Furthermore, in reversing these videos, Mavromatti creates a form of resurrection in his film. Mavromatti's obsession with the apocalyptic shines through here, with imagery suggesting Russia's nearing death as a society. Considering the despairing tone of No Place for Fools, these resurrections are likely the image of the Christian Revelation signifying the end of the world. In this reading, Astahov is a prophetic harbinger of death and destruction.

Specifically, Mavromatti clarifies that the existence of such a figure as Sergey is a sign of Russia's collapsing institutions and society.

Our interest in this carnival character lies in Mavromatti's physical construction of the holy fool's theater. Astahov's room is inescapable for the audience. The character is confined by the film's borders, but his messages and revelatory foolishness show through. Furthermore, Astahov, through the editing process, has been turned into the Mavromatti's mask of foolishness. In this unique construction of Sergey Astahov, we find the most contemporary holy fool, and the ultimate critic of Putin's Russia. Astahov is both Mavromatti's mask, but a real man in the history of this world, formed by the conditions of postmodernism and Putin's totalitarian regime. Sergey Astahov a holy fool for our time, sadly passed away from a heart attack in 2016.

## CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

This current work traces the history and development of the Russian phenomena of holy foolery (*iurodstvo*) spanning from Byzantine to current-day cinematic representations. In analyzing of the holy fool's development from a religious to political to postmodern figure, I have recognized the various transitions and translations of holy folly. However, in tracing the holy fool's translations in hagiography, literature, and history, one aspect of the figure became increasingly prevalent. As Lauren Piccolo writes in *Holy Foolishness: New Perspectives*, “*iurodstvo* is reduced to a thin rubber mask to be worn whenever needed, by anyone.”<sup>214</sup> With scholars from various traditions attempting to analyze this figure within the scope of Russian and Soviet history, permutations have led to numerous definitions of what constitutes holy foolery. Within the scope of this thesis, I have presented a grounded working definition of *iurodstvo* that I applied to the films I researched in this analysis.

This model comes with its own holes, specifically when it concerns the topic of religion. As discussed in the third chapter, with the introduction of postmodernism to the study of *iurodstvo*, the holy fool became far less “holy.” The critical moment where this pattern of behavior was seemingly stripped of its religious core is rather difficult to pinpoint. Several scholars discussed in this thesis, such as Sergey Ivanov, disagree on whether these postmodern fools even have any legitimate connection to the religious phenomenon. This thesis is grounded on accepting postmodern fools, including all protest performers who utilize the mask of holy foolery, as legitimately invoking this tradition on their work. However, where do we place the boundaries on this style of analysis? Many directors of the films studied in this paper claim to be referencing holy foolery in their works. However, is this enough for a character to be considered

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<sup>214</sup>Piccolo, “From Stylization to Parody”, 375.

a holy fool? Furthermore, if more and more figures are considered to be holy fools does the model still carry any generative potential in scholarship?

Based on the research presented, I believe that holy foolery still has the potential to be a generative field of study in analyzing dissent and protests in contemporary Russia. Considering that the holy fool is a model of critique that has been popularized throughout Russian history, literature, and even cinema, this model has true potential as an evaluative arm in Russian cultural studies. While this paper briefly discussed several prominent figures in Russian civil society such as Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky, future research on this subject could go even farther. One figure I've identified as possibly invoking this model is political activist Alexei Navalny. Although the scope of the present work didn't allow for a thorough review of Navalny's actions, online videos, nor his court proceedings, several elements immediately stand out.

Firstly, Navalny has been defined by his conflicting relationship with Russian authority. Everything from his attempted assassination to current imprisonment is part of his struggle with Putin's form of autocratic government. Furthermore, Navalny's use of humor in his appeals to power contains in themselves a carnivalesque element. While in no way am I suggesting that Navalny represents the somber asceticism of Russia's hagiographic fools, I find it possible that he is employing the holy fool's tools in his dissent.

Of Navalny's many episodes of conflict with the Russian government, I find his current imprisonment the most intriguing aspect in relation to holy foolery. Navalny was certainly aware that in returning to Russia after his poisoning that he most likely would be imprisoned. In an impassioned court appearance, Navalny issued a short anti-war and anti-Putin speech detailing his reasons for returning to Russia. In an energetic voice Navalny claims: "I'm here to prove to the Russian people, and myself, that not all Russians are crazy insane perverts and

bloodsuckers.”<sup>215</sup> Through highlighting the corruption of the Russian system that reaches all its corners, Navalny positions himself as outside of the system in a very similar manner to Dima in *The Fool*. It’s through his insane act of returning to Russia, knowing full well he would be arrested, that he intends to highlight the corruption and insanity of the Russian political system. It is perhaps this that makes Alexei Navalny a postmodern fool - a *blazhenny* for our time.

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<sup>215</sup> Radio Free Europe, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdBfyXTaz5Q>

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