The Fool for Christ: A Journey from St Paul to Pavel Lungin

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Mein Fachartikel untersucht das Verständnis der russischen Kultur von Paulus Vorstellung der heiligen Narrentum - mit einem Fokus auf das Kino. Zu diesem Zweck werde ich einen Blick werfen sowohl auf die Fakten der Hagiographien der heiligen Narren als auch auf ihre Stilisierung, die sich aus der jeweiligen Kultur ergibt, der sie entspringt. Diese Untersuchung erfolgt mit Hilfe einer representativen Auswahl an Filmen, wobei wohl die bemerkenswertesten Werke von Andrei Tarkovsky stammen und der aktuellste von Pavel Lungin mit Ostrov.

Stichwörter: Kino, Andrei Tarkovsky, Pavel Lungin, heiliger Narr

The First Epistle to the Corinthians **as foundational text for holy foolishness**

The First Epistle to the Corinthians stands out as the only text in the whole of Scripture that speaks, through a radical redefinition of the term *moria*, about the 'foolishness of God' as manifested in Christ crucified[1]. Moreover, 'foolish' and 'fool' (*moros*) are turned on their head to designate the authentic mode of Christian existence. The *Epistle* also contains an explicit injunction that came to form a reference for the practice of holy foolishness first recorded in the 5th century in Byzantium: "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (3:18). St Paul's exhortation, denoting more than a taste for paradoxical verbal constructions, was predicated on the message of the Gospels. On this account he fashions himself as a 'fool for Christ'. How can we explain Paul's radical redefinition of foolishness in the Epistle?

The first four chapters of the Epistle reveal St Paul preoccupied with explaining his own understanding of true wisdom (*sophia*), which in his view takes the form of the folly (*moria*) of the cross. At the heart of this distinction is a critical attitude towards the conventions of the world. The overriding theme of the Epistle is the reaffirmation of the entirely different system of values and the new spiritual realities brought about by the cross and the resurrection[2]. The Corinthians have

[1] "Foolishness of God' is the translation of 'to moron tou Theou' where the definite article with the neuter single of the adjective *moros* means 'the foolish thing', which indicates that rather than denoting an attribute of God it points to 'God's free dealings with the world, cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: a commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, p. 46.

[2] The unity of the epistle has been contested but for the purpose of this chapter I rely on Anthony C. Thiselton and more recently David R. Hall who convincingly argue for the integrity of *1 Corinthians* in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids,

received the apostolic teaching but they have remained 'babes in Christ', giving precedence to worldly wisdom over the folly of the cross. The foolishness of the cross is more than a simple intellectual assent with the content of the apostolic proclamation. It is 'the power of God' (1:18), in virtue of which God's transformative activity becomes effective[3]. The weakness of God (on the cross) is stronger than men (1:25) and by implication the weak things of the world are empowered by divine agency (1:27). Read in such a way, the 'message of the cross' is used critically to expose worldly wisdom and worldly power, both of which are aligned with social status, and therefore detrimental to unity and devoid of salvific qualities. In order to make this argument Paul places the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God in an antithetical relationship. This is emphasised by a paradox: the wisdom of God is foolishness from the point of view of the human wisdom, just as worldly wisdom is foolishness from the point of view of divine wisdom. Paul repeatedly insists that God has inverted all human values: the cross has shown worldly wisdom to be foolish and rendered conventional weakness powerful. This strategy of reversal ensures lofty things are concealed in the low in a discrepancy that would become important for the kind of challenge that foolish wisdom poses. In a deeper sense the reassignment of new meanings to old concepts by reversal expresses the liminal condition in which one finds oneself between the temporal world and the coming kingdom of God[4]. St Paul's critique of the world is achieved through the 'foolishness of God' manifested in the cross both in an epistemic sense: the cross defining the reality, and in a salvific sense, determining human fates[5].

Once Paul has established these new Christian values, he urges the Corinthians to practice them. The apostles are presented as models since they are indeed 'fools for Christ's sake' (4:10). With irony and sarcasm, he places the apostles in stark contrast to the privileges enjoyed by the Corinthians who are held in honour for their wisdom and social position. If they are ironically called 'kings' (4:8), the apostles are instead placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as people to be deprived of everything, even of their own life. While the Corinthians are called wise, strong and distinguished, the apostles are, in stark contrast, foolish, weak and dishonoured (4:10). In addition they share in a state of total deprivation and abjection: they suffer from hunger and thirst, are poorly dressed, beaten, homeless, earning their own living by work, reviled and persecuted (4:11-12). Through this 'catalogue of afflictions' that beset the apostles, St Paul outlines the portrait of a new kind of fool, the 'fool for Christ'.

W.B. Eerdmans, 2000 and *The unity of the Corinthian correspondence*, London: T. & T. Clark International, 2003.

[3] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 2000, p. 155.

[4] Cornelia Cyss Crocker, *Reading 1 Corinthians in the Twenty-first Century*, New York, London, T & T Clark International, 2004, p. 78.

[5] Thiselton, p. 158.

By adopting the guise of a holy fool, Paul introduces a position of marginality that gives force to the countercultural thrust of his argument against the church in Corinth[6]. In adopting the critical pose of the fool, Paul also endows the figure with a performative dimension that was to have important consequences for its later development in European culture. *Moros*, the term that St Paul uses, is the same as that which designated the emblematic figure impersonated by mimics in antiquity[7]. The use of theatrical imagery: 'for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men'(4:9), can suggest that the apostle had in mind these professional fools that entertained the crowds in the ancient world. Indeed, L. L.Welborn argues persuasively that this is the apostle's strategy: according to him St Paul makes recourse to theatrical language in order to place himself inside a well-established tradition of jest and mime[8]. By adopting such a low social status and dishonourable persona, Welborn argues, he responds to some members of the church in Corinth, who first called him a 'fool' – *moros*, in comparison with the eloquent and cultivated preacher Apollo. The dilemma he faced initially was that, by not responding to the insult, he would have implicitly accepted relegation to a social category which had no voice in Greco-Roman society except as an object of ridicule in mime shows[9]. Yet rejecting the charge and calling himself a wise man – *sophos*, would have meant accepting the values and criteria of the rich and learned in Corinth. What he does instead is admit to being a fool while redefining the term through a strategy of inversion whereby it acquires a new paradoxical sense predicated on Christ's cross and doing justice to his mission as an apostle. He thus puts forward 'a personal form of the concept (μωρός) as the truth of his life, now understood in a deeper, paradoxical sense'[10]. However, his argumentation has more than personal implications, foolishness becoming a characteristic of authentic Christian life[11].

These critical and performative dimensions are important because it can explain some of the trajectories of the development of the holy fool in European culture. In the development of ascetic holy foolishness in the Christian world, the phenomenon bears obvious similarities with the ancient mimes. A closer look at 1 Cor 4 demonstrates that the Byzantine interpretation of holy foolishness actually relies on a very concrete, literal interpretation of St Paul's injunction to become a fool. 'We have been made a spectacle (*theatron*) to the world' (4:9) was an observation which would have evoked to contemporaries the Graeco-Roman theatres and the dramatic representations and games that took place there. For the

[6] Paul Hertig, *Fool's Gold: Paul's Inverted Approach to Church Hierarchy (1 Corinthians 4), with Emerging Church implications*, "Missiology: An International Review", XXXV (2007).

[7] Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 96.

[8] L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ, A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition*, New York, London, T & T Clark International, 2005.

[9] Welborn, p. 117-118.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 119.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 117.

Byzantine holy fool in particular, though slightly less so for its Russian counterpart, the theatrical element is very important. The life of the holy fool has an increased public exposure when compared with the hermits of the desert or the monks and nuns living as recluses in the monasteries. Moreover, one of the most important hagiographic conventions is that the fool's madness was feigned. The holy fool would put on a mask, which in this case was not an object detached from his own exterior appearance. The mask enabled a play with appearances, a play between concealed sanctity and manifest depravation: from a human perspective the saint appeared sinful and foolish but from God's perspective his performance was an act of sharing in Christ's sufferings and humiliations.

The oldest Byzantine hagiographical writing that features a holy person feigning madness is Palladius of Galatia's anthology of the lives of the desert ascetics, the *Lausiac History*, written around 420[12]. The role of this fool that was living in a convent at Tabennisi, never speaking and spending her time in the kitchen in the contempt of the entire community, seems to have been to teach both the nuns and the great ascetic who had discovered her a lesson in humility. The word *sale,* used for the first time to indicate this type of foolishness, was different from *moros* so often used by St Paul in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. It is significant though that the episode from the *Lausiac History* was to be later entitled 'The one who simulated folly (*morian*)', using the Pauline term, which emphasized their synonymy. It was *salos* though that was to become the technical term to designate the fool for Christ in the Byzantium; later on in medieval Russia it was *iurodivyi*.

In the sixth century accounts of the lives of the holy fools began to proliferate: Evagrius's *Life of Symeon* (of Emesa), Leontius's of Neapolis *Life of Symeon* (arguably a different one), John of Ephesus's account of Theophilus and Maria, and *The Life of Daniel of Skete*. These accounts introduced two new elements: the performance moves to the cities and open spaces, while the feigned madness is accompanied by a feigned immorality. How did this tradition come to influence Russian Christianity? Nikephoros's 10th century *Life of St Andrew the Fool* seems particularly important in spite of being a literary construct[13]. It seems to be the first life of a saint that reaches Russia and was most probably taken as a model for its successors[14]. Many of the details of his life became commonplace in the accounts of Russian holy fools: he was considered incurably mad, walked naked, slept in the open, behaved like a half-wit, but at the same time he was endowed with the gifts of discernment and prophecy. Through his awe-inspiring spiritual gifts and bodily mortification he became the prototype for 'the terrifying ascetic'[15].

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[12] Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 49.

[13] Lennart Ryden, 'The Holy Fool', in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. by Sergei Hackel, University of Birmingham, Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1981, p. 113.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 21.

[15] Peter C Bouteneff, "What kind of Fool Am I?", Further Gleanings from Holy Folly' in *Abba: the tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, ed. by

The first Russian holy fool is considered to be St Isaak Zatvornik in the eleventh century, a hermit of the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev, but the era when the phenomenon reached a climax was the sixteenth century. It was a time when the church hierarchy turned a blind eye to abuses and injustice and the critical function of holy fool became incredibly powerful, used as a device for the oppressed to protest against autocratic power[16]. The most venerated fool of this period was St Basil the Blessed. He was believed to have appeared to Tsar Ivan the Terrible nearly twenty years after his death in order to admonish him. A comparison with the lives of Byzantine fools reveals that two important emphases had been added to the initial paradigm once translated to Russia: clairvoyance and political criticism[17]. As the obscene elements and concealment subsided, we see miracles and instances of prophecy increase to preserve the otherness of the figure. Since political absolutism was on the rise in the 16th century Russia the holy fool acquired a political function as well[18]. He became an authorised voice that could admonish the Tsar by virtue of his special spiritual status.

Russian culture provides the holy fool with a paradoxical situation: while traditionally defined by marginality, the *yurodivyi* has also entered the discourse of mainstream culture, following a move from the realm of the Church into the secular arts and cultural theory. The pre-modern figure of the holy fool has been rediscovered in Russia as a versatile tool, not only to pinpoint the nation's historical idiosyncrasies, but also as part of a subversive visual discourse that repositions the holy fool as a powerful critic of the existing order. As the figure of the holy fool is translated outside the strictly religious sphere, cultural re-interpretations result in stylized versions of the holy fool. For this reason I examine both the hagiographically inspired and the stylized portrayals. I argue that, in spite of the different forms that fictional holy fools take when compared to their hagiographical counterparts, the figure still retains, implicitly or explicitly, the same subversive function.

The hagiography-inspired holy fools

One of the earliest instances of the iconography of the cinematic holy fool comes from one of the founding figures of Soviet cinema, Sergey Eisenstein, in *Ivan the Terrible* (1944), a film in which Josef Stalin took a very keen interest. If intended and read as the embodiment or the survival of the revolutionary spirit, the brief appearance of the holy fool levels a particularly powerful critique of Stalin's autocratic tendencies. While drawing on established hagiographic iconography and

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John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dimitri Conomos, Crestwood, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003, p. 341.

[16] George P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind: The Middle Ages, The Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966, p. 342.

[17] Sergei A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 403.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 302.

the traditional understanding of the holy fool as a spiritual pole of power in opposition to the secular power, Eisenstein manipulates these features to serve his own artistic and political ends.

In the same hagiographic tradition, but less ambiguous in purpose, stands Sergey Bondarchuk's rendition of the relation between another holy fool, possibly Ivan nicknamed "Big Cap", and Boris Godunov (1598-1605). This 1986 *Boris Godunov* is a grand adaptation of Pushkin's eponymous play. Bondarchuk has the guilt-ridden Tsar confronted by a holy fool Nikolka. He wanders the streets in winter dressed in rugs, barefoot, wearing a broken metal helmet on his head and a big cross hanging in a thick chain around his neck. He acts as Godunov's conscience, reminding the tsar that his request to kill the children who have mocked him and stolen his kopek is very similar to what he himself did to the Tsarevich. The *yurodivyi* not only utters the inconvenient truth to the surprise of the crowds, but also refuses to grant Godunov's request replying he will not pray for 'Tsar Herod', which functions as an ominous sign.

A fictional figure rather than a historical one appears in Elem Klimov's *Agony* (1975). Here we remain in the same iconographic canon with the difference that the existence of a historical reference becomes less likely, even if the two protagonists of the film are two important historical figures: Rasputin and Tsar Nicholas II. The presence of the holy fool is restricted to one episode. His character is again constructed in opposition to a malefic center of power: a neat and tidy Rasputin, but one all too ready to indulge in debaucheries, is briefly juxtaposed with a filthy, hunchbacked holy fool, wearing heavy metal religious artifacts. Yet the whole scene is ambiguous as to whether the holy fool is given any positive connotation.

It is not at all surprising that the post-Soviet era has witnessed a return to this cultural model in all its spiritual significance. The rediscovery of pre-Soviet national identities after 1991 has included appreciation of Orthodox aspects of that heritage. As a result the religious component of holy foolishness is now not only explicit but vigorously affirmed. In the tradition of these cinematic vignettes, Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov/The Island* (2006) is, to the best of my knowledge, the first feature film to elaborate on the spiritual model and to make it the central concern of the film. It was conceived as a response to another stage in post-Perestroika Russia's search for identity. At the opening of his interview with the director Pavel Lungin, Andrey Plakhov comments on the symbolic value that the film has for today's Russia: "Nowadays, more than likely it is considered more important to resolve inner problems – symbolically within the individual, as within the country"[19]. The director's acknowledged ambition is to "open up new genres in film, in this case the genre of the lives of saints"[20]. Thus the film is intended as an alternative to a mainstream cultural and political discourse that overlooks religious hagiography in favour of an obsession with material problems.

[19] The press kit for Around the World in 14 Films – The Berlin Independent Film Festival at Babylon, 2006: www.berlinbabylon14.de/ger/presse/pr_russland.pdf, accessed 1 Oct. 2008.

[20] *Ibidem.*

The narrative form is similar to the pictorial representations of the *vitae* of the saints called *klejma* – a series of images framing the icon and depiction episodes from the life of a saint[21]. Partially independent episodes are welded together to create the multifarious image of a clairvoyant, penitent, prankster, pedagogue, and exorcist: father Anatoly. Although the story is set in 1970s for most of its length, Lungin utilizes the national emblem of the holy fool in such a fashion that he projects the image of a spiritual guide for the new post-Soviet era. Father Anatoly, the stoker of a monastery situated on an island, only loosely resembles the modern saints that the script writer Dmitry Sobolev used as prototypes: St Theophilus of Fool-for-Christ of the Kiev Caves (1788-1853) and St Sebastian of Karaganda (1884-1966)[22]. He is depicted in his interaction with two groups: the lay people, in whose company he is often seen drinking tea at his small stoker's shed and who revere him, and the monastic community in which he never completely integrates and which he teases permanently. In spite of his spiritual gifts, he bears the secret burden of a murder he thinks he committed during the Second World War, which will only prove to be untrue at the very end of the film.

His unconventional behaviour and his profound penitential religiosity place him in stark contrast not only to the state's materialistic ideology but also to the formalism often practiced in the monastery. In this sense we witness a "folly within folly": an uncompromising immoderation within, as it were, what John Saward calls the monastic "counterculture"[23]. If there is no explicit criticism of the recent Soviet regime, Lungin points to a mode of being in the world which becomes automatically subversive to any totalitarian system, this happening when people retain independence of mind and preserve their own freedom of action at any cost. Often control is not achieved in a violent manner, Lungin suggests, but insidiously through uncritical acceptance of norms and conventions that come to regulate the mind.

Stylized Holy Fools

In this section I will deal with reworkings of the conceptual elements of the holy fool paradigm. While their depiction departs from the 'canonical' iconography, their identification as holy fools is reliant on literary precedents and similarity of function. Ewa Thompson calls them "stylized holy fools" in order to differentiate them from the strictly hagiographic counterpart[24].

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[21] Per-Arne Bodin, *The holy fool as a TV hero: about Pavel Lungin's film The Island and the problem of authenticity*, "Journal of Aesthetics & Culture", 3 (2011), p. 1-9.

[22] Elena Jakovleva, "Ostrov" vezenija: Avtor scenarija fil'ma "Ostrov" Dmitrij Sobolev o vozmožnosti uspecha v naše vremja', *Rossijskaja gazeta*, 02-28-2007, http://www.rg.ru/2007/02/28/sobolev.html, accessed 23 March, 2011.

[23] John Saward, *Perfect Fools: folly for Christ's sake in Catholic and Orthodox spirituality*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 16.

[24] Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia. The Holy Fool in Russian Culture*, Lanham, London, University Press of America, 1987.

One instance of a stylized holy fool features in Pyotr Todorovsky's *Wartime Romance* (1983). In the first part Alexander is a World War II soldier platonically attracted by Liuba, the mistress of a major who is killed in action. When they meet again after ten years, Alexander is a film projectionist studying to become a history teacher and already married. Liuba, a worn-out street vendor has a daughter. He does everything in his power to help her, including selling her doughnuts for her and sitting her daughter. Still, Alexander's love for Liuba has a nonphysical dimension. His self-debasement and the danger of losing his wife, friends, social position, is a way of sharing in her misfortune. His mission is to help Liuba rediscover herself as a valuable and beautiful human being troubled by unfortunate circumstances. In spite of the lack of references to religion, the social behavioral model is rooted not in the new Soviet man ethos but in the pre-revolutionary 'kenotic' model of the Slavophils, who cherished the ideas of humility, self-limitation, suffering and poverty[25]. At the time when *Wartime Romance* was filmed the ideas of humility and willingly sharing in the suffering of others couldn't be more at odds with the official with the official Socialist aesthetic whose three supporting pillars were: 'ideological commitment', 'Party-mindedness' and 'national/popular spirit'[26]. Neither was it in line with the heroic male paradigm of the Soviet mythology[27]. Proposing an alternative model could have been perceived as potentially subversive of the Socialist-realist orientation if it hadn't been masked as an unpretentious comedy.

A more overtly political film is Alexander Kaidanovsky's *Kerosene Seller's Wife* (1989). A *glasnost* films set in Kaliningrad in 1953, it is designed to revisit and critique the Stalinist past. The narrative line, punctuated with Christian symbolism and grotesque allegory verging on the surreal, features a Cain-and-Abel case in which a corrupted high rank Communist official, Sergey, deliberately provokes the death of a patient, for which his twin brother Pavel, took the blame. As a result Pavel, once a prestigious surgeon, has been demoted and constrained to become a kerosene seller. He rises to the stature of a holy fool by assuming unjust social exclusion and destitution, which brings him closer to the outcasts of the community. His self-abnegation is meant to rack Sergey's conscience, which never happens as he prefers to ultimately drown himself rather than renegade his Stalinist principles. The truth is brought to light by an investigation into the accusations of bribery-taking which a priest and his community bring against Sergey, while Pavel tries unsuccessfully to take upon himself the blame for his brother's criminal activities for a second time.

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[25] Nadejda Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought*, New York, Macmillan, 1938, p. 15.

[26] Leonid Heller, *A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories*, in *Socialist realism without shores*, ed. by Thomas Lahusen and Evgeniĭ Aleksandrovich Dobrenko, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 52-53.

[27] John Haynes, *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 31.

Kaidanovsky's purpose is to contrast Sergey's ascension on the political hierarchy with his brother's utter degradation. Even the film's title obnubilates Pavel's centrality bringing his relatively unimportant wife to the fore. Under Kaidanovsky's direction the behavior of holy folly is employed to extreme effects, with grotesque images of Pavel in his repugnant fur coat crawling like a beast on the ice and mumbling indistinctively as a kind of mortification or atonement for his brother's deeds. As the priest's defeatist motto says, which is then echoed by the police investigator himself, 'Victory is the refuge of the villain', which seems to be embraced by Pavel as well. Kaidanovsky's naturalistic use of the aesthetics of holy foolishness offers more social criticism rather than moments of transcendence. The truth the investigator discoveres doesn't bring any relief to the victim since evil is endemic to society. In contrast, the truth Pavel is after is shown to lie not in the external circumstances of 'who did it', but in the miraculous personal conversion of the criminal: 'I'm convinced that without the hope of a miracle life would lose its reality'.

Only the post-Soviet era saw the employment of a stylized holy fool in a specifically religious way, with Konstantin Lopushansky's grim picture of a man who, realizing his own ungodliness, takes up holy foolishness as penitence. In *Russian Symphony* (1994), the viewer is introduced into an apocalyptic atmosphere from the first lines of the protagonist's monologue which ruminates on the idea of God's judgment of history and on the last invisible battle between the forces of the light and the forces of the dark that is underway. Its protagonist Masarin is, by his own definition, 'a Russian intellectual', a 'heir of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky', given to continuous introspection, who is drawn to action by the gravity of the events. He makes it his mission to rescue the children in an orphanage that is going to be engulfed by waters. Soon he realises that he can actually feel no compassion for the children and that it is only his mind that tells him that the children must be saved. In a discussion with his writer friend he explains his conception about life a continuous role-playing. Some play better than other but one will be the impostor – the Antichrist. As things precipitates the faithful brace up for the last battle and travel to Kulikovo, where the historical battle between the Russians and the Tartars took place. The false Myshkin appears totally changed as a stiff self-important politician and tries to reassure the people that the children only need to learn how to swim in order to save themselves.

Russian Symphony finishes where Lungin's *The Island* begins. Its last part follows the process of the protagonist becoming a holy fool. He admits to himself that his logically thought out solution for the plight of the orphans makes him a murderer. He dreams of himself being dead and of an angel who can't find any clean shirt for him as his soul in not clean. He realizes that the only important question in life regards God. The last sequence is a long shot of him plodding on his knees in the snow, dressed in rugs, with a big cross hanging in a thick chain around his neck and asking God for forgiveness. More than any other holy fool so far this one turns the attention towards the inner problems that need to be sorted

out. Empires can fall but the duplicity, this split in human psychology between the mind and the heart, can endure with fatal consequences.

The revival of the trope of holy foolishness continues to flourish in Russian filmmaking. Russia's 2010 entry for the American Academy Awards' Best Foreign Film was Karen Shakhnazarov's and Aleksandr Gornovsky's *Ward no 6* (2009), based on Gogol's short story published in 1892. The tone of the story is that of polemic, prompted by the ideological confrontation between the psychiatrist Ragin, and his patient Gromov, personifications of passivism and activism on the one hand and of atheism and faith on the other. The film, relocating the action to the present day, makes it explicit from the outset that Ragin believes the mentally deranged Gromov to be a prophet and shows his growing intellectual attraction towards him. In opposition to the doctor, Gromov foresees an era in which justice will prevail, his optimistic view being predicated on the premise of the existence of God and mankind's immortality.

Before long Gromov gains a position of ascendancy over his custodian, grounded in his capacity for suffering which is coupled with a remarkable capacity to scan the personality of the doctor, revealing the human weaknesses behind his philosophical stance. This is disturbing for the doctor: the sudden reevaluation of his principles impact his life in a way that does not pass unnoticed by his colleagues and he ends up locked in the same Ward no 6 through their 'well-intentioned' intervention. Apart from the political, social and existential issues that it raises, the film, as much as its literary source, is revealing about Russian society's ambivalent relationship towards madness. We see the tension between confinement as deviation from the norms of reason on the one hand, and its compensatory exaltation as a form of clairvoyance and wisdom on the other. Holy foolishness recuperating here rediscovers its metaphysical forcefulness.

The Holy Fool in Tarkovsky's films

Holy foolishness is a recurring theme in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) and I therefore consider his work separately. What distinguishes him from the Russian directors I have discussed in the previous chapter is the fact that he develops through time a personal conception of holy foolishness. It is framed by a particular existential philosophy of life, which, towards the end of his career, aspires towards a universal expression. The genesis of this idea can be traced quite early in his filmography. The preoccupation starts with *Andrei Rublev* (1969), going through *Stalker* (1979), matures in *Nostalgia* (1983), and reaches an apex in *The Sacrifice* (1986). The holy fool represents the spiritual sphere in his films and offers a perspective of human affairs from on high. In this sense, the irrational truth and "amorality" of the fool appear on a plane higher than the rational truth and the lay morality which ultimately lead to catastrophe and the destruction of human civilization. At the same time, the fool will be the last bastion of faith, a

representation of 'what lacks in the world: the inner freedom and the faith, which don't know the impossible'[28].

In *Andrei Rublev*, which imaginatively reconstructs the episodes of the great iconographer, holy foolishness underpins the whole directorial vision – narrative and imagery. It is merged with the concept of artistic creativity, a characteristic that will constantly reappear in the works to follow. Features of holy foolishness are spread among a few characters. The most traditional form of the fool is *durochka* – a term used by Tarkovsky in his screenplay to refer to unnamed female figure of the holy fool. She plays a very important role in Rublev's spiritual and artistic becoming. Defending her from a Tartar he commits a murder, which provokes a further critical scrutiny of his values against the background of cruelty and violence. An interesting instance of giving expression to the idea of holy foolishness is associated with the other great iconographer in the film, Theophanes the Greek. When Rublev's rival Kirill visits him, he is lying on a bench. The image of what he sees is turned upside down. This can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the message that the fools are trying to get across: 'in the kingdom of God reigns a complete inversion of our earthly values'[29]. This inversion of conventional patterns – ethic or aesthetic - is later replicated by Rublev, in both his rejection of the traditional fear-inducing way of representing the Last Judgement, and in his declaration that the *durochka* is not a sinner for having failed to follow St Paul's injunction to cover her head.

The idea of holy foolishness returns in the last three films of Tarkovsky – *Stalker, Nostalgia, The Sacrifice*, in surprising but less traditional ways. With *Stalker* a specifically religious key for its reading is suggested rather late in the film when we hear in voice-over the passage from the *Book of Revelation* (6:12-17) about the sixth seal. This is followed shortly by a recitation of the first verses describing Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-18) from which the topographic and onomastic references are omitted. Who are the three on the road and what is this Emmaus that are they after? Three characters: the Scientist, the Writer, and the Stalker set off on a journey through the Zone, in search for the Room, where one's desires are to be fulfilled. The Zone itself is a mysterious land, supposedly created by an alien civilization, governed by its own natural laws, which the authorities are striving to keep off limits. Only the 'stalkers' can guide someone there and back unharmed since the partly apocalyptic, partly paradisiacal landscape is allegedly rife with dangerous traps.

The Stalker is fashioned in the mould of the traditional holy fool, through an emphasis of his humility and simplicity. Even the film's text contains explicitly a reference to him as a *yurodivyi*: after explaining his purely altruistic reasons for being a guide into the Zone for the desperate people, the Writer concludes: 'You are just a God's fool'. Tarkovsky directs the camera to scrutinize the Stalker's

[28] Balint Andras Kovacs and Akos Szilagyi, *Les Mondes d'Andrei Tarkovsky*, Lausanne, L'age d'homme, p. 157.

[29] Fedotov, p. 322.

appearance in order to reveal it: his head is shaven, his face is marked by the hardship of his life, and his clothes are worn out. He looks vulnerable and ineffective, in keeping with his creed that "weakness is a great thing and strength is nothing": a clear reversal of worldly values. The twist that comes towards the end of the film is that this broken man, an outcast with no social ambitions and with spiritual aspirations to which the official materialistic ideology would not offer any answers, is discovered in one shot to be an intellectual. As the Stalker lies down on the floor deploring the Scientist's and the Writer's lack of faith the camera zooms out just to reveal the books that cover an entire wall of the decrepit house. This type of intellectual couldn't be more different than the 'self-assured, integrated and infallible' hero type of the socialist realism[30].

The next film that elaborates on this line of thought, pushing it to their natural consequences, is *Nostalgia.* A new idea, that of the human sacrifice, comes to the fore, working in a tandem with holy foolishness. The protagonist, the Russian poet Andrei Gorchakov, visits Italy in the company of a translator, Eugenia. His propose is to research the life of an eighteenth-century peasant musician, Pavel Sosnovsky, a Russian serf sent to study in Italy. As his subject of investigation, Andrei suffers from the nostalgia of his country, and also his wife and son. What appears to be the natural result of a geographical dislocation, a nostalgic longing for home, acquires a higher significance when he meets a native recluse, Domenico, whom everybody thinks mad for his apocalyptic views: he has hut his family in his house for seven years waiting for the end of the world. But it is this madman that is the key for the interpretation of the film.

Domenico's mission is not restricted to single individuals. As he confesses to Andrei, he was wrong when he sequestered his family for seven years in a desperate attempt to save them: 'My motives were egotistical when I tried to save my family. You should save everyone'. If he entrusts Andrei with the mission to cross St Catherine's pool with a lit candle, he reserves for himself a much more difficult task. As he puts it in the speech to the audience on the Capitoline Hill: 'It must be sunny at night and snowy in August', which means a reversal of the human values if not even more, a total transformation of the world as we know it. In order to call the world's attention to his message he proceeds with an act of self-immolation. Significantly, for his protest against society's indifference to spiritual matters, Domenico chooses Rome's Capitoline hill, very close to the heart of Western religious world.

Domenico's supreme offering is similar to Alexander's in Tarkovsky's next feature film *The Sacrifice*, who renounces everything he possesses, including his family, so that the world is spared from a nuclear disaster. Alexander is an intellectual whose moral aspirations have been stifled by the lack of spirituality around him. When the occasion presents itself, he not only lives up to it, but welcomes it: 'I have waited my whole life for this'. A former actor, Alexander

[30] Rufus W. Mathewson, *The Soviet Hero and the Literary Heritage*, "American Slavic and East European Review", 12:4 (1953), p. 506-523.

strives for an authenticity and sense of life he can only find in self-sacrificing himself for the salvation of the others. The burning of the *dacha*, the Russian house that is a recurrent image in Tarkovsky's films, is a symbolic act. It can be used metaphorically to represent the human body, in which case Alexander's final act can be interpreted not only as a renunciation of the materialistic concerns but also as a denial of his self[31]. In this interpretation his descent into madness is just the result of this total surrender into God's hands and marks the beginning of his spiritual regeneration. In both *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice* adopting holy foolishness abstracts the hero from the ordinary order of things and puts him in a position from where he can launch a critique of the fundamentals of this world. Both Domenico and Alexander, existentialist characters who take upon themselves the responsibility for the entire world, want to save humanity from the domination of materialism, spiritual bankruptcy, and ultimately disaster.

As we have seen in this discussion of films, only rarely has Russian cinema put forward a powerful representation of the holy fool as cast in the traditional hagiographical mold. One such remarkable instance is Fr Anatoly in Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov*. Often making use of an Aesopian language, meant to disguise their intended meaning, the stylized holy fools have retained a critical function in relation to the particular historical context in which they have been produced.

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[31] Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 225.

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