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The Holy Fool in Late Tarkovsky

Abstract
This article analyzes the Russian cultural and religious phenomenon of holy foolishness (*iurodstvo*) in director Andrei Tarkovsky's last two films, *Nostalghia* and *Sacrifice*. While traits of the holy fool appear in various characters throughout the director's oeuvre, a marked change occurs in the films made outside the Soviet Union. Coincident with the films' increasing disregard for spatiotemporal consistency and sharper eschatological focus, the character of the fool now appears to veer off into genuine insanity, albeit with a seemingly greater sensitivity to a visionary or virtual world of the spirit and explicit messianic task.

Keywords
Andrei Tarkovsky, Sacrifice, Nostalghia, Holy Foolishness

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For roughly seven hundred years the holy fool has remained one of the more conspicuous particularities of Russian Orthodox Christianity and a consistent, yet perpetually evolving aspect of the Russian cultural identity. Though not officially sanctioned by the church nor, strictly speaking, a uniquely Russian type, these paradoxical figures of radical asceticism and enigmatically scandalous behavior repeatedly appear in hagiography and historical accounts as men and women both revered and reviled, possessors of sacred knowledge and ostracized (often abused) vagrants. In its original forms holy foolishness, or *iurodstvo*, like many aspects of Russian Orthodox spirituality, was strongly influenced by Byzantine Christianity, in this case the ascetic *saloi*. Figures such as Symeon of Emesa scandalized onlookers by associating with prostitutes and other marginalized members of society, dressed in rags (if at all), and committed acts that would appear obscene or even blasphemous to the uninitiated. As would be many of the Russian fools in the following centuries, these individuals were nevertheless commonly revered as saints. Though not universally accepted (and the relationships of the historical fools with the church are quite difficult) the enigmatic behavior receives an ostensibly biblical justification in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians:

> We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we are laborworking with our own hands. When reviled we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things.[1]

The impact and spread of holy foolishness in Russia, beginning in the eleventh century and reaching a zenith in the sixteenth, was enormous and remained profound well into the

twentieth. Nearly every village appears to have had at least one local *iurodivyi* and many, such as Prokopii of Ustiug and Nikola of Pskov, were nationally recognized.

In the larger cultural sphere, thinly veiled stylizations of the paradigmatic "fool for the sake of Christ" occur regularly in the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and perhaps most famously Dostoevsky, whose major works nearly all include characters that parallel the behavior, demeanor, or sanctity of the fool.[2] The effects of the Bolshevik revolution all but did away with reverence for local saints and village fools, yet traces of the holy fool, a figure in decided opposition to the status quo, are found throughout the Soviet period in the works of Olesha, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn.[3] No longer wandering naked through the snow, shouting incomprehensible invective and threats of divine punishment, these later, tempered variations of the holy fool are also recurring figures in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky.

Arguably the preeminent Russian filmmaker of the second half of the twentieth century, Tarkovsky's intellectually challenging, overtly spiritual works feature diverse iterations of the holy fool archetype. While the traditionally provocative, enigmatic traits of *iurodstvo* may burst to the surface in the aggressive posturing of Theophanes the Greek or the mute *durochka* of his early masterpiece *Andrei Rublev* (1966), for the most part Tarkovsky's characters are subdued stylizations, particularly in works like *Mirror* (1975) and *Solaris* (1972).[4] By the time of *Stalker* (1979), the last film he was to make in the Soviet Union, the holy fool again comes to occupy a central place in the director's work as a character and, more broadly, a critical aesthetic perspective that resonates structurally as well as thematically. But while the appellation holy fool appears repeatedly in Tarkovsky criticism to describe his more eccentric characters, the parallels

are rarely straightforward. The eponymous Stalker, for instance, presents an easily recognizable, explicit transposition of the traditional holy fool into a more or less contemporary, albeit dystopian setting. As one recent study of the filmmaker's works puts it, Stalker appears as a "meek seeker of spiritual truths, almost a holy fool; a rather conventional figure in Tarkovsky's cinema."[5] Tarkovsky's last two films, however, mark a dramatic turn in characters that would otherwise fit quite well under the designation. Like Stalker, characters such as Domenico of *Nostalghia* (1983) and Alexander in *Sacrifice* (1986), both played by the Swedish actor (and frequent Bergman collaborator) Erland Josephson, carry the recognizable traits of the fool, evinced most clearly in their obsessively ritualistic but essentially irrational acts of sacrifice. But as the filmmaker transitions to a foreign environment (after spending a considerable amount of time working abroad Tarkovsky made his exile from the Soviet Union official in 1984), and away from the traditional cultural roots of the holy fool, the characters assume a much darker edge, moving from the feigned madness of the hagiographic fools to genuine insanity and travestied acts of self-destruction.

To dwell for a moment on *Stalker*, the work which essentially initiates the late period of Tarkovsky's lamentably brief seven-film career, the paradoxical combinations of weakness and strength, foolishness and wisdom that commonly define the fool as a character come forth in especially vivid relief.[6] By any standard, the protagonist of the film is a social outcast, a former prisoner living in wretched poverty at the edge of a railroad track with his wife and invalid daughter, herself another variation of the holy fool. His occupation, for which he seems to receive no monetary payment, consists of illegally smuggling visitors into a mysterious "zone," the remnants of some kind of

extraterrestrial or supernatural visitation. His disheveled appearance and halting speech easily cast him as a kind of marginal figure or outsider, but it is his overwhelming concern with matters of the spirit that places him firmly within the sphere of the holy fool. As it was often believed of the historical figures, Stalker possesses secret, mysterious knowledge, in this case a strategy to navigate the ever-changing path to a magic room at the center of the zone that fulfills the innermost desires of those who visit. And strangely, though his two companions, known only as Writer and Professor, entrust their lives to this knowledge, they exhibit little faith in his competence and treat him derisively throughout.[7] After a beating at the hands of Writer, a nearly ubiquitous event in the hagiographies of canonized fools, he is actually called (pejoratively) "*iurodivyi*" by his attacker, one of several Russian words designating the apparently unstable and abnormal individuals nevertheless revered as saints. Further reinforcing the connection is the protagonist's wife, who in the film's penultimate scene faces the camera and describes her husband as *blazhennyi*, or blessed, a rather explicit reference to the most famous of all Russian holy fools, Vasilii Blazhennyi, and a term widely used interchangeably with *iurodivyi*.[8] But for all this, the Stalker could hardly be described as insane nor, for that matter, intellectually backward, as the overflowing bookshelves that line a wall of his squalid dwelling strongly suggest. And this brings up one of the key aspects of holy foolishness in its purest sense: though the acts of the hagiographic fool may appear those of a madman, they are in fact just acts. Madness or stupidity is usually feigned, often emerging as obscenity and provocation, to deliberately invert commonly accepted (and spiritually vapid) conceptions of morally upright behavior. Stalker, however, does not appear to intentionally play the fool or behave in a deliberately

provocative manner. To crib Paul Tillich's famous phrase, his faith as an "ultimate concern" is so overwhelming as to make him appear mad or obsessive to the world around him.

But this does not mean that some aspects of his behavior may not be a kind of sham or trick. Like the two films which will follow, *Stalker* is a work which assumes both the eschatological tone and provocative posture of the historical fools, an often derisive criticism of a world in which larger spiritual awareness and genuine moral concern languish beneath materialistic distractions and morbid self interest. Much like the antics of the fool, the events of the story itself, as well as their unorthodox presentation, are somewhat deceptive; Stalker's journey into the mysterious zone with the talented but cynical Writer and the staunchly pragmatic Professor in search of a room that will fulfill their subconscious desires never achieves its stated aim, nor do any of the traps he warns of ever materialize. In fact there are indications that the room itself may be solely the invention of the Stalker as a means for testing the faith of his companions – though the film, much like the character, is perhaps deliberately murky in this area.[9] Their final inability to cross the threshold of the magic room lends a touch of failed absurdity to the entire work, which consistently disappoints any expectations an acquaintance with the science fiction genre may condition in the viewer. But this same move also foregrounds the centrality of faith for both the film and the protagonist. In a key sequence midway through the film, the Stalker offers up a prayer for his companions: "let them believe in themselves and become helpless like children, because weakness is great and strength is nothing." Even in this respect the expedition is to all appearances a failure, particularly for the Stalker, who literally collapses in disappointment at the end. But as a kind of

spiritual journey, the excursion does reveal essential, uncomfortable truths for the Writer and Professor. Both find that they lack the courage or strength to succeed –or perhaps even test themselves – in what eventually becomes a ruthless psychological exercise. This is not to say, however, that they do not in some way benefit from the experience but to their guide, for whom leading the men into the zone is less a job than a calling, the failure is crushing.

At a glance, the "friction between their souls and the outside world," the Stalker mentions in his prayer appears to be the conflict that traditionally marks the ideal arena of the holy fool, who deliberately overturns worldly values through the extremity of his behavior in an attempt to cast away this disparity and, particularly in Tarkovsky's films, enhance the consciousness of the spiritual within the physical. Perhaps most explicit in the parallel, however, is the supplication that his companions lose their rigidity and strength. As the filmmaker described the protagonist in his book *Sculpting in Time*, the Stalker's "apparent weakness is born of moral conviction and a moral standpoint and is in fact a sign of strength."[10] As realized in the film, the paradoxical emergence of strength through weakness, exhibited most powerfully in the opposition of this despised former prisoner to the solidity of his companions' rational convictions, again recalls St. Paul's teachings in I Corinthians: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."[11]

Nostalghia

Though many of the essential traits we find in *Stalker* carry over to the later works, Tarkovsky's variation of the holy fool assumes a significantly different form in *Nostalghia* and *Sacrifice*, the two films made outside the Soviet Union. Equating certain characters in these films with *iurodivye* is not new. In the article "In Hope and Faith: Religious Motifs in Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*," for instance, Gunnar Gunnarson devotes considerable attention to the topic in reference to the character of Alexander, and many of the more general studies on the filmmaker at least mention the similarities.[12] But it is here that the characters usually assumed to parallel the archetype become particularly problematic. The filmmaker certainly imports some key elements of the Russian *iurodivyi* to Italy and Sweden, but in this cross-cultural transposition the fools gain a much darker, more disturbing edge. The mission of bringing intimations of eternity into the finite world or, as Stalker articulates in the prayer for his companions, eliminating "the friction" between the two, remains intact. But the overwhelming concern of the earlier film now seems to have reached a breaking point and has lapsed into unaffected insanity and danger – far from the feigned provocations of the hagiographic fools and even the meek, otherworldly demeanor of the Stalker. As the filmmaker ratchets up the apocalyptic discourse, more explicit abroad than any of the Russian films, save perhaps the last, the voices and deeds of his fools become more strident and extreme, ultimately concluding with scenes of tragic absurdity.[13]

In *Nostalghia*, the meditative story of a Russian poet researching the manuscripts of a fictional peasant composer and expatriate named Sosnovsky in northern Italy, the

appearance of the holy fool would appear, at least initially, to be well within the filmmaker's thematic continuum. The longing of the displaced Andrei Gorchakov for his homeland and his wife lies at the center of the film, but it is the strangely apathetic relationship with his translator Eugenia and growing fascination with the local madman Domenico that provides much of the action. Were it not for the Italian setting, Domenico would at first seem perhaps a classic representation of the blessed simpleton. Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie, in fact, observe that he "is only nominally Italian and is in essence a figure in the Russian spiritual tradition," and, "like Stalker, Domenico has many of the characteristics of the Russian *yurodivy* – somewhat mad, mocked and humiliated, poorly dressed, living outside accepted social conventions, insulting and insulted by others."[14] It bears mentioning, however, that with his tendency to sermonize and acceptance of ridicule Domenico also suggests the influence of the Italian St. Francis, albeit with far less of the latter's good humor.[15] For much of the film the character straddles a fluid border between madness and sanctity – if indeed such a border may exist in this case. In his very first appearance on the screen, a group of bathers in St. Catherine's pool describe his past and argue that either "he is nuts" or, as one woman suggests, "he is a man of great faith." In fact, both observations are correct and, at least as presented in the film, far from mutually exclusive. Such paradoxical combinations and unexpected doublings, intrinsic to the psyche and performance of the fool, are the major concerns of Tarkovsky's later work and are cast into especially sharp relief with this character.

Even by standards of the holy fool, however, Domenico's actions are extreme. As the bathers discuss, he had imprisoned his family in their home for seven years in

anticipation of the impending cataclysm, an action Gorchakov later tells him he understands. Though *Stalker*, too, contained a markedly eschatological tone, such as the passage from Revelation in a voiceover while the three men lie flat against the waterlogged earth, Domenico's obsession perhaps moves him a step closer to the historical fools. Here predicting disaster and, in some cases, averting it, often formed a key element in the vitae. A model for the Russian *iurodivyi*, the tenth-century *salos* Andrew of Constantinople, for instance, provided a famously elaborate account of the apocalypse to his follower Epiphanius, though in most cases the doomsday pronouncements are taken (by the uninitiated, at least) as the ravings of a lunatic.[16] Domenico, of course, is much more than simply the village idiot. Though it is safe to assume he was institutionalized following the liberation of his family (as with Alexander in *Sacrifice*, he is shown being apprehended by the proverbial men in white coats) his strangeness and spiritual preoccupation shrouds a remarkable acuity of perception and intellectual depth, much as Stalker's obsessive faith may have masked his intelligence from those around him. Even the bathers, who seem to be divided in their respect and derision for Domenico, speak quite highly of his education; among other things, he is able to paraphrase parts of St. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* to Eugenia, who quickly becomes frustrated by Gorchakov's growing fascination with the madman and obvious indifference to her sexual advances.

It seems plausible that it is this resemblance to the traditional *iurodivyi* that so strongly attracts the Russian poet, and perhaps his own sense of displacement may prompt him to see much of himself in the strange Italian. Following their awkward, but somehow intimate encounter in Domenico's home, a fascinating scene of illogical

spatiotemporal dislocations, mirrored images, and a symbolic meal of bread and wine, Gorchakov comes to identify more and more with the man. The influence reaches the point where, in a dream, it is the face of the other he sees in the mirror. Though Gorchakov is already a frustrating enigma to his translator Eugenia (another in an unfortunately long line of Tarkovsky's unflattering portraits of women), he now seems to sink more and more into a world of reverie and the spirit. As he wanders, in what seems to be a dream, through a ruined cathedral he hears (or perhaps it is only we who hear) the voices of God and St. Catherine. Later, in an especially telling mixture of the sacred and the profane, he drinks himself into oblivion in the ruins of a flooded church, where he discourses at length in a rambling combination of Russian and Italian to a mysterious child named Angela. Ultimately, at the behest of his Italian mentor, Gorchakov embarks on the apparently pointless, and maddeningly repetitive, act of carrying the lit candle across St. Catherine's pool. Here, in this obsessive, seemingly inexplicable behavior, we find not only one of the key aspects of *iurodstvo* but, as Slavoj Žižek describes what he calls the "focus" of Tarkovsky's later work, the "motif of a pure senseless act that restores meaning to our terrestrial life."[17] The task Domenico gives him, stretched out in a nearly nine-minute take, of carrying the candle across the pool is manifestly analogous to the inscrutable, repetitive acts so often performed by holy fools, the "compulsive ritualism" that often makes their behavior so mysterious to their audiences.[18] Such would be Semyon of Emesa's walking through a city with a dead dog tied to his waist or, less grotesque, the thirteenth-century Russian St. Prokopii of Ustiug forever carrying three pokers in his hands. Similar acts have appeared numerous times before in Tarkovsky's films, and again *Andrei Rublev* is exemplary in this regard, but here the obsession takes

on a decidedly messianic edge – Domenico and Gorchakov are, as the former declares during their brief interview, working to save the entire world through these seemingly pointless tasks.

But for all of these correspondences, the equation of Domenico, and certainly Gorchakov, with the holy fool is somewhat more problematic than most studies of Tarkovsky would indicate. During their one interview, though he articulates his intentions with relative clarity, Domenico never drops the pretense of foolishness with Gorchakov; in fact there is no pretense. Rather than being of sound mind and voluntarily taking up the life of the fool, Domenico, to all appearances, is not only mad but acutely aware of his insanity. While there is no doubt that the history of *iurodstvo* in Russia is filled with individuals who were genuinely stricken by serious mental illness coinciding with religious fervor, such as the extremely popular (and allegedly clairvoyant) nineteenth-century figure Ivan Koriesha, the essence of the phenomenon would seem to rest in those who feign insanity as a way of deliberately provoking shock or revulsion, purposely demeaning and humiliating themselves in the process. In this sense, the relationship between the two men is also rather anomalous. Though some fools, such as the aforementioned Andrew of Constantinople, may have a confidant with whom they could speak normally, there is no tradition of discipleship within the phenomenon, if indeed that is the nature of the relationship here. Holy fools may certainly present those who listen to them with bizarre tasks, much like the one Domenico gives to Gorchakov, but these were rarely, if ever completed and usually designed to make the victims abase or publicly humiliate themselves. Gorchakov's task, as Domenico makes plain, is not necessarily intended to bring him closer to God but rather to somehow steer the rest of

the world from catastrophe – a mission which will once again confront the protagonist of Tarkovsky's final film.

Most disturbing in *Nostalghia* and certainly one of the more problematic areas to attach to holy foolishness is Domenico's absurdly grotesque self-immolation on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. While apparent self-destructive behavior is certainly the norm for the holy fool, suicide, even in the hope that this will "make them listen to his last cry of warning," as the filmmaker described the act, is an extreme virtually unknown in the historical figures.[19] In a lengthy study of the phenomenon Sergei Ivanov is able to provide only a single instance where an individual took his own life: Kirill of Velsk, a figure very much on the margins of *iurodstvo*.[20] We should keep in mind, however, that Domenico is very much a stylization of the archetypal fool, in some ways a microcosm of the film as a whole, which as Andras Kovacs points out is "constantly mixing traditional Russian cultural motives with motives of Italian renaissance and baroque."[21] Still, even in artistic stylizations, though the fool may die violently it is rarely, if ever, at his or her own hands. Strangely, it is precisely with this scene in Rome, as the film reaches a point decidedly outside the realm of the fool, that it also fulfills one of the most important aspects of the paradigm. Domenico's final act takes place literally in the public square – the ideal setting for the fool's *oblichitel'stvo*, or public denunciation – and in this he fits the model perfectly. Loud, apocalyptic, impassioned, and ultimately ridiculous, Domenico's tirade on the moral and spiritual degeneration of modern society before a loose crowd of largely disinterested vagrants or staring passers-by touches upon the same subjects that obsess his closest antecedents in Tarkovsky's works, Stalker and Theophanes the Greek, and go on to form the core of *Sacrifice*.

Beneath the ragged banner reading "*non siamo matti, siamo seri*" (we are not mad, we are serious) he rails against the ruin brought about by the "so-called healthy" and, like Stalker, makes a plea for the weak and a return to simplicity as he proposes reversing the order of the world: "Here's my new pact: it must be sunny at night and snowy in August. Great things end, small things endure […]We must go back to the main foundations of life without dirtying the water." In a mark of lucidity just before his travestied self-immolation, Domenico encapsulates the essence of the final scene as well as his role as the holy fool when he shouts from the rear of Marcus Aurelias' horse, "What kind of world is this when a madman tells you to be ashamed of yourselves?" And this, again, is precisely the role of the *iurodivyi*; in shaming himself he is shaming his audience, taking to task the powerful of the world for their own thoughtless behavior and madness. But Domenico's theatrics and the intensity of his speech are ultimately stultified by his clumsy suicide. Before he sets himself aflame he fumbles for a note he has forgotten to read, a silent clown stands before the statue mimicking his death throes, and the music he has chosen (Beethoven's "Ode to Joy") initially won't play. When it does skip to life and finally blare across the soundtrack Domenico is already in flames and the chorus is completely desynchronized with the image of the staggering man on the screen. Magnifying perhaps the total inefficacy of his sacrifice, many of the people in the crowd are not even paying attention. Rife with Dostoevskian scandal (recalling perhaps the "explanation" and failed suicide of Ippolit in *The Idiot*), the grossly inappropriate and semi-comic treatment of what should be the most serious scene of the film is not only deliberate, in which respect the film itself parallels the theatrics of the holy fool, but in Slavoj Žižek's view, embodies what "elevates Tarkovsky above cheap religious obscurantism."[22] The sacrifice is not only meaningless and irrational according to Žižek, but it is only in this senselessness that the act carries any meaning:

> The Tarkovskian subject here literally offers his own castration (renunciation of reason and domination, voluntary reduction to childish "idiocy," submission to a senseless ritual) as the instrument to deliver the big Other: it is as if only by accomplishing an act which is totally senseless and "irrational" that the subject can save the deeper global meaning of the universe as such.[23]

Žižek perhaps is right in contending that the "compulsion felt by the late Tarkovskian heroes to accomplish a meaningless sacrificial gesture is that of the superego at its purest," a reading he assumes the filmmaker would have rejected out of hand.[24] Certainly the masochistic, exhibitionist tendencies of the characters in these later films, which help tie them to the figure of the holy fool, are ripe for psychoanalytic examinations. But even so one can not ignore the overt spiritual thrust of the film and the characters, much of which finds expression in this distinct and seemingly antithetical cultural context. The denial of reason and the reliance on seemingly pointless or inscrutable ritual are perhaps the key components of *iurodstvo* and, once again, occupy a similarly central position in Tarkovsky's final film.

Sacrifice

The coming apocalypse expands to the dominant motif in *Sacrifice*, and with it the enigmatic, self-destructive ritualism already glimpsed in *Nostalghia* finds yet another explicit and puzzling cinematic expression. From the prolonged opening shot, allusions to *iurodstvo* once again permeate the work. Though Alexander is not what we could call a believer, as he makes clear in his first conversation with Otto the postman, he is hardly ignorant on religious subjects and likely (given his performance as Dostoevsky's Prince

Myshkin in a dramatic adaptation of *The Idiot* and obvious familiarity with Russian iconography) acquainted with the phenomenon of holy foolishness. Early in the film he plants a barren tree with his young son, called only Little Man, and tells the canonical story of Ioann Kolov and Pamve, in which the former is commanded to continuously water a hopelessly desiccated tree until, after a period of three years, it miraculously blossoms. Though Ioann is not regarded as a holy fool, elements of his vita do bear some traces of the phenomenon. Most glaringly, early in his career the monk declared an intention to live like an angel, do without food and clothes, and left his cell naked. The plan failed when, in marked contrast to the typical *iurodivye*, who were famous for wandering naked through the Russian winter, Ioann realized he could not stand the cold. The watering of the tree also hovers at the fringes of holy foolishness but with one marked difference. It certainly appears as yet another of those seemingly pointless repetitive actions but in this story the act eventually bears fruit, while those of the fool are, with some exceptions, necessarily left a mystery. In a new variation of the strange ritualism of the *iurodivyi*, Alexander expands on this, explicitly drawing a parallel between himself and the paradigmatic fool, but assuming that his actions, too, could make a difference: "if every single day at exactly the same time I were to perform the same act like a ritual, unchanging, systematic, the world would be changed." His own musings on this idea provide the tradition with a modern irrational twist – he will fill a glass of water at exactly the same time every day and then pour it into the toilet. What most differentiates this from the lives of the historical fools, or even those of earlier Tarkovsky films, is the clarity of intention behind the act. Alexander creates for himself a messianic task, similar to that declared by Domenico, of changing the world by means of

this bizarre action. The similarities, of course, do not end there. In the monologues to his temporarily mute child Alexander, despite his apparent agnosticism, follows Domenico and Stalker in condemning spiritual vacuity and the evils of modern civilization: "[O]ur entire civilization is built on sin from beginning to end. We have acquired a dreadful disharmony, an imbalance if you will, between our material and our spiritual development." Once again, the focus has fallen on what Stalker identifies as the incongruity of the physical and the spiritual. The ultimate consequences of this imbalance become apparent a short time later as Alexander's family and guests gather to watch an emergency television broadcast announcing the outbreak of war and an approaching nuclear confrontation.

With the threat of an immanent apocalypse (though we can never be sure if it is real or imagined) Alexander puts the vague plan of changing the world through an inherently irrational act into effect, but on a much grander scale. In the face of annihilation, the nonbeliever Alexander makes his plea to God, offering up everything – and this includes taking a vow of silence, another marker of the fool in Tarkovsky's films - if only the war could be averted. The reappearance of Otto, who himself has been mentioned as yet another variation of the modern fool, provides a solution, another act with seemingly no direct connection to events on the outside: Alexander must sleep with his housekeeper, the local "witch" Maria, to avoid the apocalypse that haunts his visions and now seems merely hours away.[25] The world has indeed changed the next day and the war averted but Alexander is still intent on carrying out the plan of offering up his possessions. In perhaps the most spectacular long take of Tarkovsky's career, he manages to completely raze his home before being carted off by the men in white coats. The film

closes with the ambulance carrying away the apparently insane protagonist while his son, hitherto silent for the entire film and described by the filmmaker himself as bearing the marks of the holy fool, finally rests underneath the tree and recites the opening lines from the Gospel of John.[26]

And so both of Tarkovsky's late films end with fire and insanity, sacrifice and self-sacrifice offered up to deliver the rest of the world from its own madness. While there are undoubtedly links to the figure of the holy fool, given the parallels briefly outlined here, it is also important to bear in mind their distance from both the historical *iurodivyi* and, to a certain extent, the fools of Tarkovsky's earlier films. The differences are significant but perhaps long in development. Madness has played at the fringes of *Andrei Rublev*, *Solaris*, *Mirror*, and *Stalker,* all of which contained intimations of apocalypse or, at the very least, a sharp critique of society's spiritual decay. Here, however, these elements are interwoven to the point of awkward salience, most explicitly in *Sacrifice*, where the protagonist's tirade against the evils of modern civilization even seems to be the progenitor of his disastrous visions and mental breakdown.

For the viewer the reality of the threat is left vague, but real enough for Alexander, just as the opacity of much of the film is somehow comprehensible to him. What does become clear is that somewhere over the course of the film Alexander experiences (as does Gorchakov) a break with the rest of the world. When precisely this happens is not quite explicit, though most likely at the end of the long monologue when he inadvertently bloodies the nose of his young son. It is here that he falls to the ground and experiences the first of the apocalyptic visions, a shot that seems to be neither reality nor dream but, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze, a purely optical situation emerging from the

breakdown of the sensory motor schema, the commonsense spatiotemporal linkages structuring the representation of the diegetic world.[27] With a sigh of "what's wrong with me," Alexander begins to fall and the film immediately shifts to a stark monochrome, describing a littered alley, overturned cars, and rivulets of water trickling through the street. It is a scene which will expand later to include running, struggling people but has no apparent bearing on the film's diegetic present. The narrative shift would seem to be correlative to Alexander's breakdown – and much of the confusion that results in the film is, as Paul Coates has noted, due to the fact that it "becomes a close up portrait of a diseased mind."[28] As in *Nostalghia*, with this focus on the aberrant behavior of the protagonist, in tandem with the prevalent ambiguity of the pure optical situations, the structure of the film itself seems to take on the pretensions of the fool in a kind of complicity with the characters. But it does not necessarily follow from this concentration on insanity that *Sacrifice*, as Coates argues, "forfeits its religious pretensions," although, to be sure, there is a crisis of belief.[29]

Alexander, like Domenico a new twist on the figure of the holy fool, in this situation gains more of an affinity (though far from a perfect one) with Deleuze's characterization of the seer or visionary in modern cinema: "The sensory motor break makes man a seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world and confronted by something unthinkable in thought."[30] While what is "intolerable" may be something beautiful as well as horrifying, here it is the intolerable contemporary or everyday situation with which the character is confronted and which Alexander describes at considerable length in the opening section of *Sacrifice*: "Our culture is defective. I mean, our civilization. Basically defective, my boy!" The film's numerous allusions to

Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, the saintly fool at the center of *The Idiot*, are particularly apropos in this new iteration of the *iurodivyi* in both films. Tarkovsky himself had long considered adapting *The Idiot* for the screen and undoubtedly, as Johnson and Petrie as well as Gunnarson have noted, Myshkin's childlike sanctity influenced characters like Stalker, Domenico, and Alexander.[31] Remarking on Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of the novel, a film Tarkovsky knew and praised highly, Deleuze equates the problem, or virtue, of Dostoevsky's character to the condition of his visionary: "he shows us characters constantly seeking the givens of a 'problem' which is even deeper than the situation in which they find themselves caught."[32]

With this we may perhaps be moving closer to the condition in which we find Domenico and Alexander, where in the face of moral bankruptcy and a seemingly insatiable death drive, the "givens" of the modern situation, "the thing to be is a seer, a perfect 'Idiot.'"[33] But there remains at least one major difference, which may indelibly imprint the stamp of holy fool on Tarkovsky's visionaries. Though the breakdown of the sensory motor schema is the result of a crisis in belief, and skepticism, as in Deleuze, is directed at a unified commonsense representation of the world on both the diegetic and the discourse levels, these figures do, if only in their own minds, retain "the consolation of the sublime" Deleuze would largely deny such characters. Tarkovsky himself called Alexander "a man chosen by God" and, far from finding themselves compelled to surrender to a vision "rather than engaged in an action," the characters lash out in an extreme, though perhaps ultimately futile, manner.[34]

While Tarkovsky's adaptation of the holy fool in this and the earlier films is but one aspect of a dense and multilayered cinematic fabric, the choice to depict such

characters is in many ways a reflection of the larger concerns of the works themselves, which are always at pains to highlight the tensions between the spirit and the flesh, and the fluid divisions between the real and the imaginary. In fact, what Žižek comes to see as the "crucial dilemma" of Tarkovsky's films, particularly the last two, is very similar to that posed by the holy fool:

> Is there a distance between his ideological project (of sustaining meaning, of generating new spirituality, through an act of meaningless sacrifice) and his cinematic materialism? Does his cinematic materialism effectively provide the adequate "objective correlative" for his narrative of spiritual quest and sacrifice, or does it secretly subvert this narrative?[35]

For Tarkovsky, with this transposition of the culture of *iurodstvo* into cinematic art, much of what Žižek sees as the dilemma is in fact an essential part of the project. The process, however, is considerably more complicated than it may initially seem. This apparent and often gross subversion of common morality by a figure whose implicit task is to illustrate (and sometimes lament) the disparity of the material and the spiritual is perhaps one of the keys to understanding the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* in general. The Greek theologian Christos Yannaras, for instance, has described the holy fool as a "charismatic man who has direct experience of the new reality of the kingdom of God and undertakes to demonstrate in a prophetic way the antitheses of this present world to the world of the kingdom."[36] However, this demonstration, as Jostein Børtnes observes, may also be based on a "temporal inversion of the divine," in which the obsessive focus on the material may even create a kind of reversed or negative symbolism.[37]

Foolishness in Tarkovsky's later films takes a somewhat different approach. While carnivalistic reversals are common, it is difficult to firmly identify this juxtaposition of the

kingdom of God with that of the material world as demonstrated by the fools themselves, to say nothing of the films as a whole. Rather, the task is similar to that described by Stalker of eliminating the friction between the soul and the body or breaking down the misconstrued barriers between the divine and the material. At both levels the relationship of the corporeal and the spiritual is less one of disparity revealed through inversion as much as a kind of immanence, revealed primarily in the slow and heavy materiality of the images. Through his obsessive concentration on the physical world, brought out so strikingly in the elaborate long takes which come to characterize these later works, the filmmaker attempts to tease out time as a virtual, spiritual force, one which reveals the eternal processes of life in motion and imprints on screen at least a sensation of actual time beyond the strictly chronological succession of moments. As Gerard Loughlin describes this orientation in *Nostalghia*, "the event in Tarkovsky's long take is drenched with the significance of time, of time's arrival; time beside or in excess of itself."[38] Here the communication of a spiritual experience, the intimation of time as an eternal force of movement, rests in the recognition of an inherence within the material, teasing out the emergence of the divine and the miraculous within the everyday. The revolt of the fool against the common order is at once a revolt against spritual indifference and the misconceived disparity. Similarly to the elements of resistance Deleuze finds in the music of Bach (as presented in Huillet and Straub's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*), Tarkovsky's fools, as much as the films themselves, are engaged in "an active struggle against the separation of the profane and the sacred," in which they strive to bring the world of the spirit to bear here and now in the physically present.[39]

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[1] I Corinthians 4:10-13

[2] For an extensive study of Dostoevsky's depictions of the holy fool see Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[3] In *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture*, Ewa Thompson cites a number of 'stylizations of the holy fool found throughout Russian literature. In addition to numerous examples from the works of Dostoevsky, characters like Platon Karataev in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Dmitrii Nekhliudov of his late novel *Ressurrection* mirror the behavoir of the traditional holy fool in several respects. During Soviet era, as Thompson contends, traces may be found in Pasternak's eponymous Iurii Zhivago as well as Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich. See Ewa Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham, MD, 1987), 125-158.

[4] Though characters like Maria, the narrator's mother and Ippolit, his son, in *Mirror* do resemble general outlines of the holy fool the parallels are comparatively slight and related more to literary stylizations than hagiography or historical accounts. This is particularly the case with Maria, who when chided by a co-worker in her Stalinist printing plant is compared to Maria Lebiatkina, the lame and mentally unstable wife of Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's *Demons.*

[5] Nariman Skakov, *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time* (London: I. B. Tauris 2012), 140.

[6] The Russian holy fool is essentially defined by paradox and contradiction. Thompson's study of the phenomenon in fact constructs a "code" out of the binary oppositions found in the behavior of most holy fools: wisdom – foolishness, purity – impurity, tradition- rootlessness, meekness – aggression, veneration – derision. See Thompson, *Understanding Russia*, 16.

[7] In this respect the situation is somewhat similar to that of the adolescent bell founder Boriska in *Andrei Rublev*, who throughout the final episode of the film loudly proclaims his possession of a secret formula to his reluctant team of workers. His successful completion of the bell (and narrow escape from execution) turns out to be a remarkable stroke of luck for, as he admits in the final moments of the film, he was never actually in possession of any such knowledge.

[8] Known in the west usually as St. Basil, the 14th century eremite has become a kind of standard for later Russian fools and was so popular the cathedral of the intersession (Pokrovskii Sobor) on Moscow's Red Square, easily the nation's most recognizable building, became commonly known as St. Basil's cathedral (Sobor Vasiliia Blazhennogo) in the years following the saint's death.

[9] Tarkovsky himself actually hints at this interpretation in interviews and stresses that the importance of the room is not necessarily that it has the ability to grant wishes but the necessity for the Stalker of finding people with a capacity for faith in a world that has effectively done away with it: "It's he who is the only witness to the existence of the Room, the only one who has faith. All information about it comes from him, so it's easy to imagine that he made it all up. For him, what's worse is not that they were afraid but that they didn't believe. That faith no longer has any place in the world." *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews,* ed. John Gianvito (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 57.

[10] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair (New York: Knopf, 1987), 181.

[11] 1 Corinthians 1:27.

[12] Gunnar J. Gunnarsson, "In Hope and Faith: Religious Motifs in Tarkovsky's *The* Sacrifice,"in *Through the Mirror: Reflections on the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, ed. Gunnlaugur A. Jonsson and Thorkell A. Ottarsson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 254-57.

[13] It should be mentioned, however, that the concerns with the apocalypse find their way into each of Tarkovsky's feature-length works. In the early years this is most prominent in *Andrei Rublev*, but even *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) foregrounds eschatological images, particularly Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse.*

[14] Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 163, 161.

[15] This, however, does not necessarily negate Domenico's affinity with the Russian Orthodox tradition. As John Saward contends, "[m]uch that is distinctive in the life of St. Francis corresponds to the spirituality of the fools for Christ's sake. In him we find all of the elements of holy folly." John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 84.

[16] See Lennart Ryden, "The Andreas Salos Apocalypse. Greek Text, Translation, and Commentary," Dumbarton Oaks Papers No. 28 (1974), 197-261.

[17] Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space," in Renata Saleci (ed.), *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 240.

[18] Natalia Challis and Horace W. Dewey, "The Blessed Fools of Old Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 22 (München, 1974), 3.

[19] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 206.

[20] Sergey Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 273.

[21] Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 388.

[22] Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space," 242.

[23] Ibid., 241.

[24] Ibid., 247.

[25] Johnson and Petrie, for instance, remark that the character of Otto "somewhat confusingly combines the outward characteristics of tempter or "evil angel" with the role of helper and "holy fool." Johnson and Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, 174.

[26] In the same passage, Tarkovsky also refers to the character of Maria and includes his own impression of the phenomenon of holy foolishness. The observations, however, are best approached with caution; though it is clear that the figure of the holy fool was on his mind in the making of the film, there is little in the work itself to fully support such a reading of these characters:

> For Alexander's little son, as for the witch, Maria, the world is filled with unfathomable wonders, for they both move in a world of imagination, not of 'reality'. Unlike empiricists and pragmatists they do not believe merely in what they can touch, but rather with the mind's eye they perceive the truth. Nothing that they do complies with 'normal' criteria of behavior. They are possessed of the gift that was recognized in old Russia as the mark of the 'holy fool', that pilgrim or ragged beggar whose very presence affected people living 'normal' lives and whose soothsaying and self-negation was always at variance with the ideas and established rules of the world at large.

Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 227.

[27] See Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 2-9

[28] Paul Coates, *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 159.

[29] Ibid., 159.

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 169.

[31] See Johnson and Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, 257 and Gunnarson, "In Hope and Faith," 256.

[32]Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time: The Diaries 1970-1986*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 357. Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 176.

[33] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 176.

[34] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time,* 227. Deleuze*, Cinema 2*, 41, 3.The filmmaker's own interpretation also denied that these characters were insane. In the case of Alexander,

> Personally I don't consider Alexander to be insane. Undoubtedly there will be some spectators who believe he's gone mad. Quite simply I believe he is in a very difficult psychological state. He represents my idea of a certain type of individual. His inner state is that of a man who hasn't gone to church in a long time, who perhaps was educated by a Christian family, but who no longer believes in any traditional way, and perhaps no longer believes at all. […] I can also imagine him as someone who is aware that the material world is not all there is, that there's a transcendent world waiting to be discovered… And when misfortune arrives, when the horror of a terrible catastrophe is imminent, he turns to God in a manner befitting his character, to the only hope which remains for him… It is a moment of despair.

Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews, 180.

[35] Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space," 254. The cinematic materialism to which Žižek refers here is Tarkovsky's concentration on entering "the spiritual dimension only via intense direct physical contact with the humid heaviness of earth (or still water)," a marked contrast to the traditional emphasis on spirituality as lightness or incorporeality. See Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space," 249.

[36] Quoted in Saward, *Perfect Fools Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality,* 27.

[37] Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography,* trans Jostein Børtnes and Paul L. Neilsen (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1988), 33.

[38] Gerard Loughlin, "The Long Take: Messianic Time in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*," *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol 13 No. 3-4 (July October 2009), 377.

[39] Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews1975-1995*, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 329.

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