The holy fool as a TV hero: about Pavel Lungin’s film The Island and the problem of authenticity

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Abstract
Holy foolishness (jourdoство in Russian), a special monastic practice in the Orthodox Church, has become an important theme in the post-Soviet Russian culture. The example that perhaps has had the greatest impact is a feature film, Ostrov, The Island from 2006 directed by Pavel Lungin. The film tells the story of one fool in Christ, father Anatolij, who after committing a serious crime has become a monk in a small monastery in the Arctic. The film gives some examples of his provocative practice: clairvoyance, healing, and exorcism. What is demonstrated and interpreted is how an important phenomenon in the Russian Orthodox tradition is mediated, discussed, used, and changed in its new context. The material for the study is the film itself and the discussions around it in Russian mass media. The focus will be on the concept of authenticity. I argue that this concept has a crucial interpreting capacity for creating meaning in the film combining an Orthodox form of piety, a demand on art, and a crux in the postmodern condition.

Keywords: Russian cinema; postmodernism; Russian Orthodox Church; Jurodstvo; Pavel Lungin; authenticity

Holy fools (saloi in Greek, jurodivye in Russian) have, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, become an important theme in the post-Soviet Russian culture. Ksenia of Petersburg, one of the most renowned female fools in Christ who lived in the 18th century, has been canonised as well as a whole host of fools from the Soviet era. Holy foolishness has become a popular subject among the Russian cultural philosophers and one of Russia’s most famous writers Ljudmila Ulitskaja has written a play, Seven Saints, on this theme.¹

This Byzantine ideal of holiness has become something of a mainstream in the post-Soviet Russian culture. The example that perhaps has had the greatest impact, however, is a feature film, Ostrov, The Island directed by Pavel Lungin. The film had the highest viewing rates on Russian television at Christmas time 2006 when it was broadcasted, second only to Putin’s New Year’s speech.

The task in this article is to analyse this film and its relation to both the religious tradition and to

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post-Soviet Russian thinking. My intention is to show how an important phenomenon in the Russian Orthodox tradition is discussed, used, and changed in its new context. The focus will be on the concept of authenticity. By this I mean the desire for the genuine, but also the insight in the difficulty or impossibility to achieve this authenticity.

Authenticity is a concept that has been revived especially from the second half of the 1900s. It is closely linked to other contemporary notions such as Conceptualism and Postmodernism and also to the development of various electronic media and computer games creating virtual realities. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s use of the notion simulacra to define the status of signs in a modern world, signs that have lost their relatedness to any reality whatsoever, is also one aspect of this discourse on authenticity in contemporary culture. Authenticity has also a dual significance of, on the one hand, genuine reality, perhaps even understood as a non-mediated reality, and on the other hand an artistic authenticity (that is as genuine art or as non-fake) making the term complex but also effective to use in this analysis. It ultimately pertains to the naïve viewer’s question if what you see or read is real or make-believe.

THE PLOT

The opening of the film is set during World War II in the Arctic. A Soviet vessel with two men on board, a captain and his stoker, is boarded by Germans. The two of them are hiding in the bunkers but the Germans discover the stoker. He is beaten and out of fear of death he reveals where the captain is hiding. He is promised that his life will be spared if he shoots the Captain and he actually commits this heinous act.

The rest of the film is set in 1976, i.e. more than 30 years later. The stoker has now become a monk named Father Anatolij in a small monastery located in the immediate vicinity of the place where he committed his crime. He is still a stoker and is now in charge of the monastery’s enormous boiler. He has become a fool in Christ, widely known for his miraculous abilities.

The entire film is set in a barren landscape of snow, ice, water, rocks, and the pale budding tundra herbs. Church services are performed but with the same barrenness as the surrounding landscape and without beautifully singing choirs. Everything is fastidious in the film, which has been called a biblical parable by a critic. The question of patriotism, which otherwise is so important in the Russian context, particularly with regard to World War II, is missing. No one talks about the stoker’s desertion during the war but only about his personal sense of guilt and his pangs of conscience because he killed a man. This is a provocation against all forms of nationalism that thrives within the Russian Orthodox Church today.

The film The Island might be compared to the film Repentance (1987) by the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze, one of the most important movies of the glasnost period. Also in Lungin’s film the concern is penance, but a personal one and not related to society and history making as in Abuladze’s case. In the super-ideologised world that was the Soviet Union and now is Russia, Lungin transposes the moral issues to a personal level, to the question of the pilgrims’ penance, and even more the protagonist’s own: he has killed a man. One question that recurs is why Cain killed Abel and the answer given is that it was envy, but at the same time Father Anatolij himself has killed his brother, the captain of the ship, not out of envy but out of cowardice.

The film has also been compared with Andrej Tarkovskij’s Andrej Rublev, and Lungin has certainly been influenced by him, for example in the use of black and white photography and they share an interest in close-ups of nature.

Father Anatolij is a fool in Christ, a particular form of a monastic order in the Russian and
Byzantine tradition. The film depicts a traditional conduct of a fool in Christ, compared to the vitae. He behaves provocative, sometimes threatening, he performs incomprehensible acts, which are later revealed to have been prophetic. He provokes sinners to repent. At one point, Father Anatolij throws a piece of wood at another monk, he is playing with bark boats and disturbs the church service. In the long run everything turns out to have an explanation and a deeper meaning. He provokes the other monks, claiming that they ought to fully give themselves to Christ and have no other aspirations. He throws the boots that the abbot is so attached to on the fire and tosses his warm and soft blanket in the water to show that the abbot should think of his salvation instead of worldly matters.

THE FOOLISHNESS IN CHRIST

The phenomenon of foolishness in Christ is known in Byzantium from the fifth century. One of the first fools was a nun, of which the church historian Palladius writes that she pretended to be insane and possessed by evil spirits. To explain this behaviour the church historian quotes the apostle Paul: “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise” (I Corinthians 3:19). This and similar passages in the New Testament are, when interpreted, commonly seen as metaphors directed against worldly wisdom or Antique philosophy and not as advice to turn into a madman. In foolishness in Christ, however, they are understood as a summons to become a fool in the direct sense of the word. The phenomenon itself raises the question of authenticity: Is the requested foolishness of a metaphorical or real kind? The ideology of the sacred foolishness contains moreover a motif of initiatio Christi and one of visionary and prophetic ability.

Holy Simeon, who lived in the sixth century in Byzantium, was dragging a dead dog behind him on a rope for days. This has been interpreted as a gesture of utmost humility, that he wanted to show that he was no better than an animal. The fools in Christ often compare themselves to dogs, almost always to the dogs’ advantage. The most famous of fools is Andrew (10th century). In a revelation in the Blachernai church of Constantinople he saw Theotokos holding her girdle, her omophorion, as a sign that she protects the city and the world. Andrew is particularly loved in Russia and a special day is dedicated to him, “The protecting veil of the Holy Mother of God”, which is celebrated October the first.

The phenomenon of fools in Christ existed in Byzantium until the 11th century when the tradition almost, but not completely, disappeared. The tradition was then transferred to Russia when the country was Christianised in 988, and it reached its peak between 1400 and 1650.

The holy fools have been devoted a substantial interest by humanities researchers in recent decades. On one hand, a whole series of monographs and numerous articles that analyse and interpret these phenomena have been published. On the other hand, vitae dedicated to fools in Christ have been published in critical editions.

FATHER ANATOLIJ, THE FILM, AND FOOLISHNESS IN CHRIST

In the film the practice of the fool in Christ is highlighted in the form of a few encounters with pilgrims who come to him with various problems and afflictions: He convinces a young girl not to have an abortion, he makes an old woman stop thinking about her dead man, and heals a young boy who is crippled and unable to walk without the help of crutches. In all three cases the fool behaves in a way that provokes particularly the secular audience: he pretends to be pregnant himself by wearing a bag in front of him and tells the girl to her face that she will never have the
opportunity to have another child so she must take the chance now, the old woman is requested to fulfil an impossible promise to get the opportunity to meet her husband again, the mother of the healed child is demanded in a very insisting and brutal way to stay for another day in the monastery although work is waiting for her. At the same time he is constantly calling into question what is worth living for. There is thus a Christian or existential message in the film that is perceived as the director’s and main character’s own.

At the end of the film a Soviet Admiral comes with his insane daughter on a visit to the monastery and Father Anatolij also cures her. It is presented as a classic scene of exorcism, common in horror films. Of course it is also an episode that fits well into the genre of a vita dedicated to a holy fool. Anatolij finds a common language with the girl obsessed by the devil by cackling like a hen. Then he reads prayers over her to exorcise the evil demons and she is cured. A miracle has occurred and it then turns out that the Admiral is none other than the man whom Anatolij believes he has shot but, in fact, only injured.

After reconciling with the Admiral, Anatolij is ready to die. He dresses himself in a shroud and lays down in his coffin waiting for death. Even in this matter he annoys his fellow monks. He has begged his brethren to bury him in an old box when they would like to make him a beautiful coffin. After the reconciliation, which also includes his brethrens, he is buried in that very box but it has been turned really luxurious by his fellow monks. The film’s ending scene shows how this coffin or box is transported to the cemetery by boat and in the place of a mast there is a large Russian Orthodox cross made out of wood.

Father Anatolij provokes by demanding that the Christian message be taken seriously and even literally. That is a trait inherent in the phenomenon of jurodство, foolishness in Christ, and it is closely related to the literal understanding of foolishness as we noted earlier. The literal and the authentic is in this context, I would claim, the same notion. It is a parallel to the use of authentic as a strive for the unmediated reality.

Two more monks are presented to us more closely. One of them represents the artistry in orthodoxy, he is an icon painter, and the other represents discipline and order. Both are portrayed with great sympathy and it is easy to take the position of those two against Father Anatolij’s stern and strange behaviour. The main character provokes the film audience probably as much as he provokes his surroundings. An outrageous behaviour in relation to the surrounding society is central to the phenomenon of traditional holy foolishness. And if we think about it more closely, is not his humility mixed with provocations rather an evidence of arrogance? This is a question being raised in relation to all fools in Christ and here also to Father Anatolij. Several researchers and thinkers have pointed out this ambiguity of the phenomenon and Lev Tolstoj has also noticed it.

The film consists of a number episodes, of partially independent of each other, almost like anecdotes. It’s the same construction as an icons klejma, individual images at the edges of the icon that show the saint’s life as a series of episodes. The episodical and anecdotal become even stronger in a fool’s vitae and these traits have been transferred to the cinematic language of The Island.

The film itself contains many interpretations of Anatolij’s strange behaviour; in the same way as vitae-texts explain what the persons in the stories find strange and sometimes repulsive. Later scenes explain earlier ones that initially were incomprehensible and provocative. The film as well as the fool vitae is built up by suspense: will the prophecy come true later in the narration?

AUTHENTICITY

The Russian–German scholar Boris Groys notes in a recent article that the art of film is the most secular form of the arts because it does not have any historical links with the sacred sphere as all the others have. In the case of The Island, the film media is indeed used to depict a sacred phenomenon transforming a vita to moving images. That gives a special dimension to the film, both of distrust and of credibility, which in a way can be said (but with different emphasis) of all films with religious themes. Lungin’s film with its medieval theme furthermore lands in a postmodern, mass-medialised, and a largely secular world.

Something that constantly appeared in the debate about the film is the very question of
authenticity, which might be seen as a key issue in a depiction of any religious experience, but especially of foolishness in Christ that in fact thematises this question: is he/she a real fool in Christ or not, it is the question raised in almost every vita of a fool in Christ. The question of authenticity is at the same time important as we noted in the beginning of this article for the whole of the postmodern condition.

Some of the orthodox critics of the film have doubt if it is permissible for an actor to play a monk. The Russian Church’s late head, patriarch Aleksij II, gave a neat turn to that question stressing that it is fully possible because everyone knows what it means to be a sinner and, thus, actors and monks are alike in that aspect. For all people and not only for monks, the goal of Christian life is penance. The monks are also played by actors known for playing villain’s parts in Russian films giving the question of penance as well as the question of authenticity an extra dimension.

The scenario was written by a young student from the film institute, Dmitrij Sobolev, and he has maintained that his text is based on two different vitae, so all parts of the film could be real and genuine:

The story itself with sin and redemption, I invented, and what to fill it with ... If I had invented also that, I’m afraid that would have made a very postmodern scenario. In the monastery, everyone lives under a monastic rule, and any mistake would lead to the disruption of reality here. Therefore, I relied on prototypical stories. In principle, my hero had two prototypes—the reverend elders Theophilus of the Cave Monastery and Sebastian of Karaganda. Theophilus lived in the 19th century, Sebastian—in the 20th.

The two vitae mentioned in this quotation do not appear to contain many specific details pertaining to the film, perhaps they are mentioned only as markers of authenticity and truthfulness by the writer. What probably is the case, which applies to almost all artistic representations of fools in Christ, is that the knowledge mainly comes from the scholarly and popular portrayals of the phenomenon despite claims of the opposite as in this case. A classic work in the field is the two researchers Dmitrj Lichačev’s and Aleksandr Pančenko’s book on laughter in the old Russia, a book that is inspired by Michail Bachtin, which is the main source today in Russia for understanding the phenomenon of holy foolishness.

What also attracted much discussion is the happy end. The man who was presumed dead turns out to live. God can make the done undone in his grace. So should the closure probably be interpreted in a Christian perspective rather than as a sentimental and poorly pasted happy end, as the film’s critics have claimed. From the vita genre perspective, the end is a miracle questioning the causality of this world. In the same time the happy end questions the authenticity of the narrative and the narration understood in a secular way by the film audience. It is too unlikely and too sweet.

The screenwriter thus maintained that he wanted to create a credible film and not add too much from himself, which according to him would have meant that the film would have become postmodern and, therefore, not authentic. What has occurred instead is that the very authenticity has become one of the key issues in the discussion of the film, a discussion that is, as we already noted, traditional in the treatment of a religious subject and especially holy foolishness, while it is also part of a postmodern questioning of reality’s and art-works’ ontological status.

Some commentators have also questioned the accuracy of the historical and realistic rendering of the events. How could Father Anatolij have existed at all under the isolation of the church during the Brezhnev-time? Lungin, as well as the screenwriter, usually respond to such questions with the statement that artistic truth and reality are not necessarily the same thing, they deny the
necessity of historicity. Several critics suggested that the film only plays with the realia of the church at a distance and, therefore, that it is completely harmless and thus uninteresting:

Так вот Остров — это довольно остроумная и удачная "игра в попов". Реальность соотносится с нею примерно так же как реальный Третий Рейх с фильмом про Штирлица. Обязательное условие удачной игры — нарочито чужая материальная оболочка плюс ментальная и психологическая близость героев к зрителям.16

So The Island — it is a pretty clever and successful attempt “to play priests”. The reality is correlated with it in much the same way as the real Third Reich with the movie about Stirlitz. Mandatory condition for a successful game is the presence of a deliberately strange material covering, plus the mental and psychological closeness of the characters to the audience.

Stirlitz was a popular hero in Soviet films, an early equivalent to the British James Bond. The phenomenon of play making, of pretending, is in fact a very important one in the genre of fool vitae. In a loyal interpretation this fact is elucidated in the film, in the quoted critic’s opinion the playing makes the film uninteresting.

PRAYER AND AUTHENTICITY

The film asks questions about conscience, belief in God, morality, and life choices in every moment. The answers are thought provoking. Father Anatoliy’s conversations with visitors and monastic brothers in which their glances meet seem to contain an absolute sense of presence, and never before, according to my mind, has prayers been represented in a film with such force as in The Island, from the prologue with its repetition of the classic prayer of the heart practiced by the Orthodox ascetics “Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”, to the film’s final words “Lord, receive my sinful soul”.

This sense of presence that both have to do with the main actor Petr Mamonov skill and with the fact that he allegedly already knew these prayers by heart. Did he pray for real or is it just a play-acting? He has specifically argued that his prayers were genuine. Almost all of his lines are in Church Slavonic, the traditional liturgical language of the Orthodox Slavs.

A prayer is, I would argue, always a prayer irrespective if it is read by an actor who only plays that he is praying or by an actor who does not believe in God.17 The addressee of the prayer is not on stage, not in the film, not in the auditorium, not even in this world. This applies especially to prayers that are a part of a liturgical practice where the words are not personal any more. The fact that they are read in Church Slavonic further strengthens their character as congregational prayers. The American religious scholar Michael D. Swartz writes in his book about the Jewish tradition that “prayer is an actor in a ritual context” and this pertains not only the rabbi’s or priest’s liturgical prayer but even the private prayer.18 Prayer may be seen as free also from the actor and his role. It is this fact that makes the prayer so special and, in this case, further deepens the question of authenticity, which is — as we have already seen manifested — in the film. Father Anatoliy’s prayers are assuming authentic prayers but still read by an actor and framed in a piece of art.

The main actor, Petr Mamonov himself, perceived the film as a religious sermon, something that the director did not, and the latter has warned of a one-sided ideological interpretation of the film. The church, which was built for the film, was turned into a real church afterwards. After the shooting of the film, it was falsely rumoured that Mamonov had become a monk. When he received a film award, he continued to play his role from the film and demanded that the party dressed crowd should stop playing roles and start living for real, an incident that developed into a major scandal.19 Mamonov’s acting in and around the film is in the centre of the discussion on The Island. One critic has called his achievement in the film a case of “absolute authenticity”.20 Another critic has mentioned his acting in the film as "абсолютно документальный Мамонов",21 “absolute documentary Mamonov”.

The Russian cultural researcher Sof’ja Malen’kich maintains that the interest in jurodste in Russia today generally has its origin in the search
for the authentic, the real. She also refers to Jean Baudrillard. The fool’s play with reality becomes a way of approaching reality and pass from simulacra to reality:

In a situation when the idea of God, church and faith is profaned, foolishness is a form of regaining the sacred. In the world of simulacra it is so impossibly difficult to face the reality that it becomes necessary to overcome all accepted norms, conventions, even moral, to find “a taste of life”, a sense of reality.

The question of authenticity is very complex in the discussion of this film. The issue of religious credibility is mixed with a postmodern preoccupation of simulacra and a traditional discussion of the mimetic and perhaps above all, a questioning of authenticity and a desire for authenticity that is an important part of postmodern thinking in general and in Russia especially.

CRITIQUE OF THE FILM

There are two groups who are very critical of Lungin’s film The Island from the ideological point of view. One is the Christian fundamentalists who believe that it is not sufficiently Orthodox, the other is the liberals who believe that it is wrong to make a film that is positive to the Orthodox tradition today: It is inappropriate to present exorcism as something positive or show a scene that can be interpreted as a protest against abortion. The film is playing into the hands of the obscurantists. The old positions on the question of religion are resumed: on the one hand the liberal intelligentsia that, after a short visit to the Orthodox Church’s sphere of influence during the late Soviet era, has returned to sharply criticising that tradition. On the other hand, a narrow and restricted Orthodox church, which is hostile to secular culture in general and that may actually in the end turn out to be hostile against the phenomenon of foolishness in Christ.

One of the most famous Russian cultural researchers, Mark Lipovetskij, argues that the film is a continuation of Soviet propaganda film; just that politics has been replaced by religion:

This apparently means that films depicting Russian Orthodox saints and holy old men will be produced with the same frequency as films about devoted communists were produced back in the 1970s–1980s. In this context, the first screening of The Island in the presence of clergy, a screening orchestrated by prayers, looks like a re-make of an “all-Union premiere” of the newest propaganda film in the late Soviet Union /.../

Lungin transforms a tragic human story into a Sunday school tale and replaces history with the comforting simulacrum of eternity. Lipovetskij thus perceives the film as an ideological piece of the same sort as Soviet propaganda films or, with other words, he blames the film for its lack of authenticity. It is for him an example of a simulacrum of eternity; thereby he is using Baudrillard’s term as an accusation against the film and its theme of jurodstvo, while the same phenomenon (but not particularly in relation to the film) was seen as a salvation from simulacra by Mal’enkich.

The film must also be upsetting to anyone who wants to see the Orthodox Church as only magnificent golden icons and rituals. The Island instead attempts to reflect on the question of the presence of evil, the necessity of penance and especially the requirement to give your life completely to God. The film divides the audience just as the foolishness of Christ traditionally does in the vitae: the doubters are the Orthodox fundamentalists as well as rationalists.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE FILM

Is the film an Orthodox call to repentance and to follow the Christian message with the utmost folly as an ideal? Sure it may be perceived in this way, but one can also begin to doubt the motives of Father Anatolij, just as he doubts himself. Is he not playing with people in an evil way, is it not true
that he remains a coward just like that night when he betrayed his neighbour? Do not his actions towards the other monks and visitors indicate pure malice from his side and are not the other monks with their moderation right? The uncertainty about the moral content of the actions of the fool is a part of the phenomenon of foolishness in Christ as a religious phenomenon but also the very key component in Lungin’s film The Island. This uncertainty also applies to the film, director, and actor’s intent: is it a token of true spirituality or is it a commission from the church, is it sheer speculation to use a Russian theme as much as possible just for economical reasons? Perhaps the liberal criticism of the film is right and fair?

Much of the film shows Anatolij when he carts coal and heats the boiler. The fire serves as a treatment for Anatolij, but at the same time scenes from the boiler room lead the thought to depictions of hell as Lipovetskij notes in his article. Anatolij is perhaps not the holy man who many think (but definitely not he himself) but the devil’s apprentice. It is this portrayed ambivalence, which perhaps gives the strongest impression in the film. It is this intent: is it a token of true spirituality or is it a commission from the church, is it sheer speculation to use a Russian theme as much as possible just for economical reasons? Perhaps the liberal criticism of the film is right and fair?

The theme of the film is thus foolishness in Christ; that is, a phenomenon that has been a preoccupation for the postmodernist critics since the early 1990s. This phenomenon, which by its nature is provocative and is on the outskirts of the Orthodox tradition, is here coming into the spotlight turning to the mainstream. It is the provocative potential, mixed with the social criticism and ambiguity that makes the figure so popular in Russia of today. The film is at the intersection of traditional Orthodox thinking and a postmodern and post-Soviet culture, which can be summed up by the notion of authenticity, the strive for it, the questioning of it, the denial of it, or in the end the accomplishment of it.

NOTES

2. Susanne Knaller and Harro Müller (Hrsg.), Authentizität: Diskussion eines ästhetischen Begriffs [Authenticity: Discussions about an Aesthetic Notion

Wilhelm Fink Verlag] (München, 2006), 7–35. See also: Lauren M.E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby, Goth: Undead Subculture (Durham, NC, 2007), 279. Here there is a very apt summary of the issue of the relation between reality and art in the answer to the question of what is “authentic experience”: ‘All media—visual art, print, television, film, and the World Wide Web—remediate a complex archaeology of assumptions, values, and representational strategies in an ongoing quest to approximate ever more closely an unmediated reality and thereby to transcend mediation. This desire to transcend representation, however, is governed by the irony that our perceptions of ‘reality’ are shaped by conceptions of versimilitude derived from previous generations of media’.
4. Ibid., 7–16.
5. For a comprehensive discussion of the phenomenon and the literature about it see Per-Arne Bodin, op. cit. 191–254.
8. For an overview of literature on the subject see: Bodin, op. cit., 191–95.

8 (page number not for citation purpose)


20. Liderman, op. cit.


Courtesy of “Kino Rossii”