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A Holy Fool for Our Time?

Petr Pavlenskii as a Case Study of the Paradigm of Iurodstvo in Modern Russian Art

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An acclaimed Polish writer, Olga Tokarczuk, released last year a book called *Jacob's Scriptures*. Writing of a nearly-thousand-page-volume took her six years. The author herself describes this period as solitary, arduous and exhausting.

I was elated at hearing this statement, not because I am mean, but by virtue of a striking similarity to my own experience. Although my work makes no claim to be a magnum opus, I would describe the process of writing in similar terms. Well, “life is not a walk across a field”, to cite Pasternak’s *Hamlet*. Russians, with their outstanding sense of humour, have coined a witty repartee to this line, “but there are many good people in this world”.

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Introduction

*Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis,
vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis,
qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?*¹

“I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key”, stated Sir Winston Churchill in a BBC broadcast in October 1939.² Nearly eighty years later, we find ourselves in the same place. Many a researcher pursue the goal of finding out what “the Russian soul” is really all about. However, it seems quite unlikely that “the Russian knot”, as opposed to the Gordian one, will ever be disentangled. After all, why would we do that? Complicated as it is, Russian culture serves as an inexhaustible source of enchantments, inspirations and intellectual challenges. What we really need is a better and unbiased comprehension of Russian cultural productions seen from a broad perspective. History is a teacher of life, stated Cicero in his *De Oratore*. Conceivably, one of the keys to understanding Russia we are searching for nowadays is its history. Studying the past to understand the future can be compared with looking back to be able to move ahead.

Since culture is a collection of codes, it is hardly surprising that tradition fuses together with modernity to manufacture a new cultural product. Still, holy foolery (*iurodstvo*) is one of the few socio-cultural phenomena that have been up to a certain degree, present in the Russian cultural realm from the eleventh century until the present day. We can even venture an assumption that this socio-cultural phenomenon has survived tempestuous periods of Russian history and keeps reappearing in multifarious forms. What are these forms, however? Is there any established evaluative tool for defining divine foolery? If so, what kind of parameters should it include? Suffice it to look at visual, literary and performative works to conclude that the paradigm of *iurodstvo* is still demonstrable in the modern artistic discourse in Russia, albeit to different dimensions and degrees. Instances of visual re-interpretation of holy foolery include *Stalker* (1979) by A. Tarkovskii, *The Island* (2006) by P. Lungin, *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away* (2013) by A. Veledinskii, *Judas* (2013) by A. Bogatyrev and *The Fool* (2014) by Iu. Bykov, just to name the relatively recent ones. By the same token, the paradigm of holy

¹ “By what other voice, too, than that of the orator, is history, the evidence of time, the light of truth, the life of memory, the directress of life, the herald of antiquity, committed to immortality?”, Cicero (Latin) 1862: 110, English 1860: 92.

² <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/RusnEnig.html> (accessed 13 October 2015).

foolery can be traced in the literary creations, such as *Live with an Idiot* (1980) by V. Erofeev, *The Holy Fool* (2000) by B. Evseev and *The Seven Saints from the Briukho Village* (2008) by L. Ulitskaia, as well as in the performative arts – Blue Noses Group, The Voina Group, Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlenskii, who in more or less conscious form realise the pattern of holy foolery.

The present work is based on the premise that the behavioural paradigm of holy foolery (*iurodstvo*) proves itself to be a generative analytical instrument in the studies of modern Russian culture. To check plausibility of this assumption, I have analysed Petr Pavlenskii's works of art against the backdrop of the holy foolish tradition. The current thesis to a certain extent fuses together the present and the past; hence its Janus-like structure. Since we pursue the objective of unpicking the significance of holy foolish paradigm in Petr Pavlenskii's artistic utterances, we need first to understand the origins of this tradition and analyse major scholarly tendencies in the field.

Therefore, the first chapter presents *iurodstvo* from a historical point of view, as well as introduces academic interpretations of this notion. Its material is organised along two patterns, a diachronic and a topic-based. If the former is an overview of the historical sources, then the latter presents various interpretations of the phenomenon in scholarly literature. This interdisciplinary approach enables us to view holy foolery from a wide range of vantage points: literary, perennial, anthropological and postmodern. This “catalogue of perspectives” also shows that the perception of the holy foolish behavioural paradigm keeps evolving and expanding. The theoretical background provided in the first chapter serves as a good departure point for the analysis of modern art.

In order to show the continuity and deep-rootedness of holy foolery in Russian tradition, the initial part of the second chapter analyses briefly non-conformist artistic movements during the late Soviet period and after the collapse of the USSR. In so doing, the study, informed by the background knowledge outlined in chapter one, emphasises elements of *iurodstvo* in protest art and establishes a set of analytical terms that are going to be implemented in the main case study.

The semiotic study of Petr Pavlenskii's artistic utterances is at the core this thesis. To be able to conduct an investigation of his “actions”, as the artist calls his performances, I have put forward a triad which is meant as an interpretative tool for the chapter. This triad includes the binary oppositions of central vs peripheral, absence vs presence and vertical vs horizontal. These categories are mentioned in the analysis of *iurodstvo* by Panchenko, Likhachev and Wodzinski; yet, to the best of my knowledge, they have never been used as an instrument for explication of *iurodstvo*, not to mention modern art. The reason for implementing categories

traditionally associated with holy foolery in the analysis of Pavlenskii's works is to pinpoint (or rule out) the aesthetic affinity of these two cultural phenomena.

Chapter 1. What is *Iurodivyi*? Literature Review and Methodology

*They vse to go strake naked, saue a clout about their middle,
With their haire hanging long and widely about their shoulders,
And many of them with an iron coller,
Or a chaine about their neckes, or middes, even in the very
extremity of winter.
These they take as Prophets, and men of great holiness, giving
them a liberty to speak what they list without any controulment,
thogh it be of the very highest himselfe.³*

In this chapter I would like to briefly present holy foolishness (*iurodstvo Khrista radi*), as well as provide the reader with a state-of-the-art overview of the research devoted to this notion.⁴ The core of this presentation rests on the idea that in order to successfully conduct an investigation of the applicability and realisation of the holy foolish paradigm in contemporary Russian art, one has to be *au fait* with the origins and development of the *iurodivyi* both as a religious and secular figure. By presenting the multiplicity of vantage points, from which holy foolery has been studied, I hope to depict the broadness of this cultural tradition. The first part of the chapter is devoted to a chronological outline of the sources, while the second part provides the framework for topic-based investigation of the subject. In other words, the two anchorage points of the chapter are the diachronic and the phenomenological perspectives.

1.1 Who is *Iurodivyi*?

The phenomenon of holy foolishness, known in Russia since the eleventh century, is simultaneously realised in two major realms, viz, the religious and the secular. Consequently, Eastern Christianity distinguishes between an order of canonical saints, on the one hand, and social outcasts, on the other. Although the fundamental task of *iurodstvo* in both realms remains the same, i.e. to indicate that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (I Cor. 3:18), it is realised on different levels – the spiritual and the psychological (Ivanov 2005: 9).

Iurodstvo Khrista radi (Foolisness for Christ’s sake), investigated from a theological vantage point, is to be regarded as a “radical manifestation of Christian kenosis” (Fedotov 1966: 316), which is a form of asceticism characteristic of the Eastern Church and deeply rooted in the revolutionary conception of wisdom presented in the New Testament: “Let no man deceive himself. If anyone among you seemeth to be wise in the world, let him become a fool, that he

³ Fletcher, Giles. 1966 (1591). *Of the Russe Common Wealth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁴ Different authors prefer different versions of the untranslatable term *iurodstvo*. They include “holy foolery”, “divine foolery”, “holy foolishness”. Analogically, *iurodivyi* is often referred to as “holy fool”, “holy folly” or “divine fool”. All these terms are treated as synonyms, and are used for variety’s sake in the present thesis.

may be wise” (I Cor. 3: 18).⁵ Kenosis is a *sine qua non* term in studies on holy foolery, denoting the “self-abnegating of Christ”, who abandoned his divine power and become incarnated to save men.⁶ By the same token, the *iurodivyi* debases himself/herself as an act of brotherly love. As Ware (1979: 108) highlights, “the fool carries the ideal of self-stripping and humiliation to its furthest extent, by renouncing all intellectual gifts, all forms of earthly wisdom, and by voluntarily taking upon himself the Cross of madness”.

Extrinsically speaking, the *holy fool*, or *salós* (Gr. σαλός) can be characterised by deliberately eccentric, if not deplorable, behaviour, seemingly senseless acts performed in public. This way of conduct is aimed at not merely vexing, amusing and embarrassing viewers, but providing them with spiritual admonition. Under the guise of foolishness and buffoonery, the *iurodivyi* carries out his one-man performance, which generates ambiguity and confusion, making the paradox *raison d'être* of the notion, since the true meaning of holy foolery is to be known exclusively to God. The fool is, consequently, “an emblem of both the incarnate God and the most fallen man” (Murav 1992: 26).

The anomalous position that the *iurodivyi* occupied in the society made him or her both an indelible part of Orthodox Christian spirituality and a prominent socio-political figure. Holy foolery as a cultural pattern has become engraved on the Russian mass (sub)consciousness. Over the last few decades, the anthropological phenomenon of *iurodstvo* has been investigated from various standpoints. The paradigm of *iurodstvo* has been implemented to explicate the postmodern culture in its diverse forms (literature, film, performance). In this way, our understanding of holy foolery keeps expanding and evolving. Significantly, some paradigmatic elements of *iurodstvo* have been put firmly on the art agenda. Due to its generative potential, the holy foolish behavioural pattern is successfully implemented in a variety of contexts, and therefore acquires new meanings and representations. It should be acknowledged that

⁵ Sergey A. Ivanov (2006: 19-20) provokes a scintillating discussion of the above-mentioned quotation. Over the years of scientific research on holy foolery, the words of St Paul have served as the doctrinal foundation of *iurodstvo*. However, according to Ivanov, this text proves to be irrelevant in the context of the Eastern Orthodox Church for two salient reasons. First and foremost, Paul could not know anything about holy foolishness, because it was still to emerge. Secondly, in the broader context, this passage is highly ironic. The Apostle maintains that “*he is wise in Christ and not the Corinthian neophytes*”, and therefore Paul’s elaboration on ‘*stultus per Christum*’ should be explicated in the context of arguments – “among his Christian contemporaries – about pagan wisdom” (J. Goetzmann, ‘*Moria*’, in C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter, 1978), 1025).

⁶ On the kenotic nature of holy foolery see Hunt, Priscilla. 1993. “Ivan IV’s Personal Mythology of Kingship”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4, p. 789.

iurodstvovanie (behaving in a holy foolish manner) is an important component of Russian cultural code.⁷

In the framework of the current study I present a bibliographical overview of scholarly research on the issue. My paper makes no claim to be an exhaustive examination of research on *iurodstvo*, but is rather designed to provide a background for understanding the phenomenon *per se*, as well as its multifarious manifestations.⁸ This section is organised along two strands, the diachronic and the topic-oriented. The former is an account of the historical sources devoted to the notion, whereas the latter is a navigation through some major scholarly approaches to the field. The goal of the second part is to explore the religious, historico-hagiographical, semiotic, perennial, literary, anthropological and postmodern motifs of holy foolery.

1.2 The Sources

Chronologically speaking, *iurodstvo* was first depicted in vitae and hymns, as well as icons and frescoes. The oldest texts describing holy foolishness date back to the eleventh century. Russia's earliest story about *iurodivye* originates from the Kievan Cave Patericon and describes a spiritual exploit of Isaac the Cave-Dweller (Isaakii Pechernik). However, the Russian Lives of canonised fools are considered inadequate as historical sources for numerous reasons (see Fedotov, *op. cit.*, p. 317).

First and foremost, rarely were they written by contemporaries, and even if that was indeed the case, pious hagiographers endeavoured to maintain an apologetic stereotype rather than describe the stark reality. That is why the vitae are often arid and cliché-ridden. Secondly, writers frequently depicted protagonists in the remote past, so as to strengthen the aura of sanctity, and consequently neglected the temporal context. By the same token, visual sources on *iurodstvo*, such as icons, illustrations and needlework, possess a rather low credibility, because they were not meant to provide any scientific account of the phenomenon, but served to establish a cult. As Ivanov (2006: 260) points out, early iconography depicts Prokopii of Ustiug as “a man clad in proper and luxurious clothes and well groomed”, whereas “the ancestor of all Russian holy fools”, as Grillaert (2007) calls Prokopii, was known for sleeping naked on

⁷Cf. Kobets – Hunt (ed.) 2011, p. 17, and Laura Piccolo (*ibid.*) “From Stylisation to Parody: The Paradigm of Holy Foolishness (*iurodstvo*) (in:) Contemporary Russian Performance Art”, pp. 373-389.

⁸ For the extended bibliography see: Bodin, Per Arne. 2009. *Language, Canonisation and Holy Foolishness. Studies in Post-soviet Russian Culture and the Orthodox Tradition*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, p. 193. and Kobets – Hunt (ed.). 2011. *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, pp. 3-6, 15 -40.

the church-porches, accepting food only from beggars and praying at night. Such instances of unreliability are numerous, and consequently, the scarcity of bona fide sources looms large.

The tradition of *iurodstvo* reached its climax in the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, when it witnessed the largest number of canonisations. Hence “a separate genre, the hagiography of holy foolery, matured around the turn of the sixteenth century, and it was not based on the monastic paradigm but on the urban version of holy foolery” (Ivanov 2005: 263).⁹ The quantity of reliable materials amplified in the seventeenth century. The *saloi* were described in monastery calendars and city chronicles, as well as depicted in icons. The hagiographical genre underwent considerable changes. Authors would meticulously describe the extreme eccentricity of their protagonists’ behaviour, rather than smooth it over (which had been a distinctive feature of the early writings on *iurodstvo*). The immense popularity of the *iurodivye* in the late medieval period gave rise to the apocryphal (folk) *vita*, where hagiographical elements fused together with folk religion. The biography of Vasilii the Blessed (1468?-1552?) may serve as an example of the above-mentioned tendency. His *vita* contain illuminating details concerning divine foolery that are absent from the traditional ecclesiastical works; for instance, the holy fool inspires horror, conducts himself irreverently and possesses clairvoyant skills.

Foolishness for Christ’s sake was strictly forbidden by Peter the Great. Although the eighteenth century witnessed a gradual displacement of *iurodivye* from the social ambit, the notion continued to exist and preserved its recognisable traits until the Communist revolution. Even though holy foolery was banned, quasi-clerical hagiographies of *saloi* were published in abundance.

In the nineteenth century *iurodstvo* ceases to be a solely religious phenomenon and becomes an object of scholarly research, as well as a pervasive topos. Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State (Istoria Gosudarstva Rossiiskogo)* “created a stereotype of the *iurodivyi* for generations of writers to emulate, reference, and appropriate for their own artistic purposes” (Kobets, 2011: 26). The next to depict holy foolery was A. S. Pushkin, whose literary creation *Boris Godunov* served as an inspiration for M. Musorgskii’s opera. Many a classical writer employed the motif of holy foolery, yet with different attitudes – Saltykov-Shchedrin and Gorkii spoke of it disapprovingly; Tolstoi and Dostoevsky – reverently; while Nekrasov and Bunin did so nostalgically (Ivanov 2006: 352).

⁹ The chronological order of Russian divine follies’ canonisations is distributed in the following way: four in the fourteenth century, eleven in the fifteenth, fourteen in the sixteenth, and seven in the seventeenth. Tsar Peter the Great banned holy foolery. The Church also authorities ceased to canonise *iurodivye*, claiming that “many abuses and impostures had become connected to it” (Fedotov 1966: 316).

Karamzin's *History* opened a new chapter in research on divine foolery. At the turn of the nineteenth – twentieth centuries, the history of Russian holy foolishness gathered a new momentum. After years of oppression, the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* became a focal motif in the intellectual and spiritual life of Russia (Kobets 2011: 25). There proliferated new hagiographies, and the cult of holy fools regained importance.

The modern history of research on holy foolery began when Russian scholars compiled and published medieval ecclesiastical sources and individual vitae, as well as reprinted Makarii's Great Menology. It was a collection of saints' lives, which also included hagiographies of some holy fools, to be read each day in church and authored by Metropolitan Makarii (1481?-1563). Interestingly, the volume embraced many ideological and polemical texts, which praised Muscovite imperial power and criticised Catholicism and Islam. Other outstanding publications include *Foolishness in Christ and Fools for Christ's Sake of the Eastern and Russian Orthodox Churches* (1895) (*Iurodstvo o Khriste i Khrista radi iurodivye vostochnoi russkoi tserkvi: istoricheskii ocherk zhitiia podvizhnikov blagochestiia*) by Ioann Kovalevskii, and two books authored by father Aleksei Kuznetsov, *Holy Foolishness and Pillar-Dwelling (Iurodstvo and stolpnichestvo)*, published in 1913, and *Blessed Holy Fools of Moscow, Vasilii and Ioann (Sviatye blazhennye Vasilii i Ioann, Khrista radi moskovskie chudotvortsy)*, which remains the only work devoted to Vasilii the Blessed and Ioann the Big Cap.

1.3 Religious and Hagiographical Perspectives

If the inception of the Soviet era is marked by a cessation of scholarly research on *iurodstvo*, then in the late and post-Soviet period holy foolery has made its comeback. Suffice it to mention that Ksenia of St. Petersburg was declared a saint, and her official vita was published (1986). Many church-sponsored hagiographies appeared in that period.¹⁰

Even though the scholarly research of *iurodstvo* was brought to a virtual standstill in Soviet Russia, Western and Russian émigré scholars continued the study of holy foolery. Among non-Russian authors who investigated this notion one should mention Ernst Benz, whose article “Heilige Narrheit” is considered a classic (Bodin 2009: 193). Also, publications by I. Kologrivoff, C. de Grunvald, V. I. Ilyin and I. Goraïnoff deserve attention.

¹⁰ These publications, inter alia, include: Ieromonakh Damaskin (Orlovskii), *Mucheniki, ispovedniki i podvizhniki blagochestia Rossiiskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi XX stoletiiia: Zhizneopisaniia i materialy k nim* (Martyrs and Saints of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Twentieth Century), Tver, 1992; A. N. Vlasov and A. A. Turilov, *Zhitie sviatogo pravednogo Prokopiia: Khrista radi iurodivogo Ustiuzhskogo chudotvortsia*, Moskva 2003; A. M. Moldovan (ed.), *Zhitie Andrieia Iurodivogo v slavianskoi pis'mennosti*, Moskva 2003; O. V. Loseva, *Zhitiia russkikh sviatykh v sostave drevnerusskikh prologov XII-pervoi treti XV vekov*, Moskva 2009.

The works of George P. Fedotov offer an all-embracing survey of Russian spirituality. His monographs *The Saints of Old Russia, X-XVIII Centuries (Sviatye Drevnei Rusi X-XVII st., 1931)* and *The Russian Religious Mind (1960)* are regarded as important works in the history of Russian sanctity, and had a significant influence on the research on the history of Russian spiritual development. The author aptly employs features of hagiographical writing in his monographic treatise. Fedotov concludes that *iurodivye* occupied a central role in the Russian *res publica*, and even more importantly, played a pivotal role in the restoration of the state's spiritual equilibrium. Fedotov's works are said to be the first to analyse the reverberations that Orthodox Christianity inflicted on the Russian collective consciousness (Zenkovsky 1967: 296). This comment is very telling in numerous respects. First and foremost, Fedotov was apparently one of the first Russian thinkers to see the connection between religion and the formation of self-image of a nation. Secondly, the above-mentioned assertion appears also to corroborate the premise on which the present work is based, that the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* has permeated both Russian culture and the Russian self-image,

It should be acknowledged that *iurodstvo* has been indissolubly linked with the Orthodox Christian Church, and therefore employed by theologians to explicate religious phenomena. Among exegetes who used the paradigm of holy foolery in their contemplation on religion, is S. Bulgakov in *The Orthodox Church (1988)*. Divine madness is not the scientific crux of this publication, but he emphasises that the Russian soul looks for its ideal of sanctity in humility and self-denial. Having forsaken dignity and reason, the person gains 'sensitisation' of spirit, i.e. perceives the invisible and hears the inaudible; this 'going beyond' oneself enables the individual to obtain a so-called mystic experience, which paves the way to extra-rational and intuitive cognition. Also Paul Evdokimov, in *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty (1989)*, applies the notion of holy foolery to fathom *philokalia* (Ancient Greek: φιλοκαλία "love of the beautiful, the good"). He advocates that *iurodstvo* is a kenotic disguise over genuine beauty (cf. "He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him", Isaiah 53, 2), and holy fools deliberately mar their looks to reach the depths of ignominy where they bring light. Theological contemplations of *iurodstvo* are to be found in T. Špidlík's volume – *The Spirituality of the Christian East (1986)*.¹¹ Cardinal

¹¹ Špidlík's work is of immense ecumenical value. He dedicated his scholarly life to studying and teaching the theology and spirituality of the Christian East in the hope of reconciling the Eastern and the Western Christian traditions. In this encyclopaedic overview of Eastern spiritual teaching he has created a bridge by which Western Christians may pass over centuries of misunderstanding and obliviousness (available at: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Spirituality-Christian-East-Systematic/dp/0879079797>, accessed 22 September 2014)

Špidlík (1998: 348) accentuates that knowledge attained through heart is an Eastern Christian ideal. The spiritual life, as well as the centre of cognition, are concentrated in one's inner depths, i.e. the heart. If for Leonardo da Vinci "love is the child of great cognition", for Eastern mystics "heart is the seat of love".

Holy foolery is a twofold phenomenon, i.e. it encompasses the sacred and profane realms. Thus, understanding *iurodstvo* demands the introduction of socio-cultural as well as ecclesiastical terms. Such notions as heart, *philokalia*, or kenosis, seem to be of the essence when investigating divine foolery, because a purely rational analysis of the irrational conduct represented by holy fools would be methodologically erroneous, and consequently lead to false conclusions.¹² Works of Bulgakov, Evdokimov and Špidlík give theological accounts of holy foolery, which promotes a broader view of this phenomenon. More often than not, the tropological component of holy foolery is overlooked in the scholarly investigation.

Although the religious aspect of holy foolery has never been at the forefront of scientific research, the volume *Perfect Fools* by John Saward is the most-cited monograph elucidating *iurodstvo* as a spiritual phenomenon present in Byzantium, Russia and Ireland. The author outlines characteristic features of *iurodstvo* with an illuminating insight and considerable literary skill. Still, Kobets (2011: 29) criticises this publication for 'his Slavic peer' assentation that the holy foolishness was "largely foreign to the Catholic West", as well as "apologetic tendencies and minimal discussion of the Eastern Orthodox tradition of holy foolishness". Saward's work has become one of the most important English-language sources on the issue of *iurodstvo*.

Another publication that presents holy foolery from the historical-hagiographical perspective is *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (1996) by Derek Krueger. The author explores the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* through a detailed explication of Symeon's vita, and draws parallels between the lives of Symeon and Diogenes the Cynic. Krueger's prime focus is the significance of Leontius's presentation of Symeon, who bears a resemblance to both Diogenes and Christ. Krueger corroborates the suggestion that the implementation of the Cynic model into Symeon's hagiography was productive for instructing his audience. Nevertheless, from Ivanov's point of view, the presentation of Simeon as a "Christian Diogenes" is deficient, for the interpretation of this saint's vita is not viable outside the cultural paradigm of holy foolery (2006: 108). Kobets (2008: 494), in turn, points out that

¹² Cf. Challis, Natalia – Horace W. Dewey. 1974. "The Blessed Fools of Old Russia" draws definite parallels between holy foolery and infantile autism.

one cannot denigrate Krueger's assertion that Leontius's opus was vital for the Hellenistic heritage, especially the textual one.

Another work worth considering is *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography* (1988) by Jostein Børtnes. The scientific crux of this publication is the developmental history of Russian hagiography, in which *iurodivye* play a prominent role. Holy foolery, defined as "voluntarily martyrdom", was used actively by Old Believers. As a topos, *iurodstvo* plays a central role in Avvakum's vita. Interestingly, for Muscovite culture, divine foolery, just like "jester" (*shut*), was a byword for profane mockery, hence banned from the official, written culture and falling within the ambit of unwritten laughter culture. Børtnes dwells on the differences between buffoonery and holy foolery, highlighting the importance of ambivalent laughter that the *iurodivyi* provokes. However, the focal point of his analysis is when he concludes that Avvakum's self-portrayal as a holy fool can be regarded as a transformation of evaluative categories of high and low culture. (Børtnes 1988: 276). In other words, the unofficial modes of expression, formed out of pre-literary patterns of the laughter culture, were "translated into writing and combined with elements of the traditional genres of early Russian literature" (Børtnes 1988, pp. 276-277). This is how the traditional hagiographical elements entered classical literature.

Among the prominent present-day scholars who explored the topos of *iurodstvo* in the hagiographical sources, is Sviltana Kobets. I will narrow the focus of investigation to Kobets' most important works.¹³ To begin with, her doctoral dissertation *The Genesis and Development of Holy Foolishness as a Textual Topos in Early Russian Literature* (2001) provides an insightful study of the phenomenon from a diachronic vantage point. She presents the notion of holy foolery against the backdrop of pre-dating Byzantine models, as well as developmental

¹³ For a broader bibliography see: "Holy Foolishness and its Hellenistic Models: Serapion the Sindonites or Serapion the Cynic?" (in): Madeleine Gray (ed.) *Rewriting Holiness*. London, UK: King's College London Medieval Studies (forthcoming), "Lice in the Iron Cap: *Holy Foolishness in Perspective*. Priscilla Hunt & Sviltana Kobets (eds.) *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* Bloomington, Slavica Publications, 2011; "Isaakii of the Kiev Caves Monastery: an Ascetic Feigning Madness or a Madman-Turned-Saint". Priscilla Hunt & Sviltana Kobets (eds.) *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* Bloomington, (in): Slavica Publications, 2011; "An Illuminated Vita of Andrew the Fool of Constantinople from the Hilandar Research Library at Ohio State University". Priscilla Hunt & Sviltana Kobets (eds.) *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* Bloomington, (in): Slavica Publications, 2011; Юродство и юродствование в пост-советском кино: Покаяние (1986) Абуладзе, Такси-Блюз (1990) и Остров (2006) Лунгина. *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*. No 28, Spring 2009; Folly, Foolishness, Foolery. Review of Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*. Translated by Simon Franklin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; The Paradigm of the Hebrew Prophet and the Russian Tradition of *iurodstvo*. Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes, Special Issue: Canadian Contributions to the XIV International Congress of Slavists, 2008, Macedonia; From Fool to Mother to Savior: the Poetics of Orthodox Christianity and Folklore in Svetlana Vasilenko's Novel-Vita *Little Fool* (Durochka). *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 51, No.1, Spring of 2007, 87-110; "Foolishness in Christ: East vs. West", *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, Vol 34, No. 3, Fall of 2000, 337-364.; "The Russian Paradigm of *iurodstvo* and its Genesis in Novgorod", *Russian Literature XLVIII*, Fall of 2000, 367-388.

phases in the formative process of *iurodstvo*. Kobets (2001: 209-292) recognises the elements of the literary discourse in which *iurodivy* ceases to be merely a spiritual mentor but is perceived as a “critical device”, fusing the role of the cultural and the moral paradigm.

Kobets’s publications include an insightful article (2008) based on the assumption that there are several close affinities between Russian *saloi* and the Hebrew prophets. She maintains (2008: 32) that through written, audible and visual sources, accessible to the Eastern Slavs from the earliest Kievan times, the Old Testament prophet emerged as a literary and behavioural model for holy fools. Consequently, Russian hagiographers depict fools for Christ as prophets, God’s mouthpieces and miracle-workers.

Another valuable contribution to the research on *iurodstvo* is “The Russian Paradigm of *Iurodstvo* and its Genesis in Novgorod”, in which Kobets draws a distinctive line between the Byzantine and Russian modes of holy foolery. She emphasises (2000: 383) that the differential features of the phenomenon described in the Novgorodian *vitae* of *saloi* make Russian divine foolery *sui generis*. Among the *topoi* that are peculiar to the representation of the Russian holy fool one may enumerate, inter alia, a lack of explicit description of the holy fool’s actions, as well as pious, soothed depictions of the *iurodivyi*’s behaviour (yet not completely devoid of elements of aggression). More often than not the holy fool is presented as a prophet, a clairvoyant or a sage (Kobets 2000: 384), rather than a social and religious pariah.

The next distinctive feature of Russian *iurodivyi* is his/her evident sainthood. Contrary to their Byzantine prototype, Russian holy fools do not camouflage their ascetic exploits. Quite the opposite, the *iurodivyi* is shown reverence, and even more importantly, s/he performs a vital political function.

1.4 The Beginning and Development of the Semiotic School

The advent of Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s opus *Rabelais and His World: carnival and grotesque* in 1965 opened a salient chapter in the research on holy foolery, that of the semiotic studies. Although the author himself barely mentions the term *iurodivyi*, his work proved to be seminal for many holy foolery scholars to come. Like some other Russian scholars, Bakhtin was of the opinion that folk culture, with carnival as its inherent part, serves as a plausible departure point for thorough semiotic studies.¹⁴ In his work, Bakhtin established a system of ideas and terms that are applicable when describing the culture of early East Slavs, and *iurodstvo* in particular.

¹⁴ In the early 1920s, Russian scholars – Zelenin, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Bogatyrev as well as Propp – highlighted the essence of “the lower strata of culture as opposed to uniform, official “high culture” (Bakhtin 1984: X). Trubetzkoy (*Europe and Mankind* 1920) was concerned with the problem of European cultural “centrism” and lack of dialogue between socio-cultural strata.

Holy foolishness is investigated in the light of such concepts as carnivalisation, “laughable behaviour”, “laughter culture”, “heteroglossia” (*‘raznoreche’*), multiplicity of styles (*mnogostil’nost’*) and dialogisation, which all originate from Bakhtin’s publication. The author (Bakhtin 1963: 164) observes that the realm of carnival promoted the emergence of bilateral social discourse, in which members of the lower cultural strata can unmask arbitrariness and falsehood by means of parody:

Parodying is the creation of a dethroning double, it is “a world turned inside out”. Within its limits, parody is the profanation of *everything* sacred and everything serious; everything has its own parody, that is, its comedic aspect (Bakhtin 1963: 170).

Applied to the context of holy foolishness, this idea appears to be immensely productive. First and foremost, one should not forget that *iurodstvo* was an inherent part of comedic culture in Old Rus’ (although the comic aspects of this phenomenon are recognised from the external point of view). Moreover, the binary character of carnival corresponds to the dialectic nature of holy foolery which presupposes duality, i.e. the co-existence of the profane and the sacred realms, on the verge of which *iurodivyi* aptly manoeuvres.¹⁵

Bakhtin’s line of thought was taken up by scholars inspired by the Tartu–Moscow School – D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko and N. V. Ponyrko, who in 1976 published *The “World of Laughter” in Ancient Rus’* – a semiotic study of *iurodstvo*. This collection of academic essays includes Panchenko’s significant work – “*Laughter as Spectacle*” (“*Smekh kak zrelishche*”), in which the author investigates holy foolery as an indelible part of Russian ludic culture. Drawn out of the ecclesiastical ambit, *iurodstvo* attained a secular dimension, thereby placing the divine fool betwixt and between two salient realities, the sacred and the profane (Kobets 2011: 30). This duality is considered by Likhachev and Panchenko as a *sine qua non* feature of Old Russia’s culture.

In 1984, Lotman and Uspenskii published *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, in which they investigate the poetics of behaviour and the theatricality of everyday life as previously neglected aspects of early Russian culture. This volume includes the essay “New Aspects in the Study of Early Russian Culture”, which is a thorough discussion of Likhachev and Panchenko’s work. According to the two scholars (Lotman – Uspenskii 1984: 38-39), due to the fact that the “objects of research are not texts as such, but texts as part of culture as a whole, texts

¹⁵ Ambiguity is the fundamental problem about holy foolery; some *iurodivye* were definitely insane, others just feigned madness, whereas some were betwixt-and-between the two realms. This assertion is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather point towards some general tendency.

indissolubly bound to behaviour”, Likhachev and Panchenko’s picture of *iurodstvo* is “no longer something that is alien and remote from the researcher (...) but becomes lively and animated”. Most notably, Uspenskii (1985: 333) delineates three types of anti-behaviour that were characteristic for Old Russia: sacred (connected with the cult of the dead), symbolic (related to the penal system of Old Russia) and didactic (conjoined with *iurodivyi*).

Another comprehensive work on holy foolery which challenged the primacy of Panchenko’s study is *Byzantine Holy Foolishness (Vizantiiskoe iurodstvo 1994)* by S.A. Ivanov. It is a meticulous account of the Byzantine foolishness for Christ’s sake, viewed from diverse standpoints, i.e., the phenomenological, the conceptual and the historical. Thanks to the extensive bibliography, including Greek and Latin sources, Ivanov’s monograph significantly expanded research on holy foolery. The 2006 expanded and revised English translation of Ivanov’s book made his work available also to the western community of Byzantinists. Ivanov provides a chronological account of the tradition of *iurodstvo*. By adopting a diachronic approach, Ivanov outlines the main features of *iurodstvo*, and explores the process in which the notion was shaped. The author studies holy foolishness from its origins in Egyptian monasteries through its evolution in the cities of Byzantium, and discusses its apogee and decline. He then proceeds to analyse Russian holy foolery, which can be regarded as Byzantine heritage, on the one hand, but also as its reinterpretation and deconstruction, on the other. It is noteworthy that Ivanov contemplates the holy fool’s role as a denunciator and whistle-blower, in the chapter “The *Iurodivyi* and the Tsar”. As Ivanov shows, the dynamic relationship between the holy fool and the tsar is deeply anchored in Russian culture, hence it has far-reaching consequences. Nonetheless, a major flaw of this chapter, from Kobets’s (2008: 495) point of view, is that Ivanov does not include Hunt’s study of Ivan the Terrible’s holy foolery,¹⁶ which is, to her mind, “the most complete study of this subject and cannot be ignored by scholars of this topic”. More importantly, Ivanov, by broadening the spectrum of the study through explication of other paradigms akin to *iurodstvo*, present in medieval Europe and the Islamic world, depicts holy

¹⁶Priscilla Hunt’s article “Ivan IV’s Personal Mythology of Kingship” (1993) is based on the premise that Ivan IV established an idiosyncratic set of beliefs based on the Christian doctrine, according to which he perceived his atrocities and brutalities as morally defensible. Just as Christ, Ivan IV embodied two natures, i.e. the divine and the human, hence the tsar’s conjoined meekness and severity (*smirennaiia groza*) (Hunt 1993:783). This perplexing fusion could only realise itself in the form of *iurodstvo*. Ivan IV himself used the pseudonym “*Parfenii iurodivyi*”, which emphasises the dichotomy between purity and pollution (cf. gr. ‘*parfenii*’ means chaste, while rus. ‘*iurodivyi*’ means holy fool), and forms an antithesis. If holy foolery includes “self-pollution” (deliberate violation of normative codes of behaviour), then the ruthless tsar realised it through acts of great atrocity. The victims, in turn, were “invited to become Martyrs in order to combat sin” (Hunt, op. cit., p. 790). The above-mentioned thesis is corroborated by Alain Besancon in his publication *Sainte Russie* (2012). The scholar is also of the opinion that Ivan IV’s conduct was based on the belief that he represents an iconic depiction of Jesus – the Awesome Eye Saviour (*Spas Iaroe oko*), which enabled the tsar to simultaneously play the roles of an executioner and a saint.

foolery as an archetypal phenomenon. Significantly, secret sanctity has different perceptions in diverse cultures,¹⁷ according to the author. In Eastern cultures, Orthodox Christianity and the Sufi tradition, *iurodivye* are at the cultural forefront, while Western Christianity “saw no particular merit in paradoxical holiness” (Ivanov 2006: 375).

1.5 The Perennial Philosophy (*philosophiae perennis*)

Ivanov was not the first to explore “the crazy wisdom” or “holy madness” model against the cross-cultural backdrop. In fact, an extensive body of research on *iurodstvo* studies this phenomenon through the prism of perennial philosophy (*philosophiae perennis*), which is based on the premise that religious traditions stem from one universal truth. In 1991, Georg Feuerstein published *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Racial Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools and Rascal Gurus*.

This volume is an academic endeavour to depict “holy madness” as a religious category, peculiar not only to Christianity but also to Islam (including Sufism), Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Feuerstein describes holy folly as *axis mundi* (the world axis) of two realities, namely the sacred and the profane, highlighting simultaneously that “the religious clown” might be perceived as ‘eccentric’ only from the viewpoint of conventional society. Although the author does not devote much scientific interest to holy foolery *per se*, this publication is insightful thanks to its perennial perspective. Feuerstein successfully presents the realisation of holy madness in various cultures. The notion is recognised in Zen tradition (the Zen poet Han-shan (literally: Cold Mountain) (9th c.) or Ikkyu (nom de plume: Crazy Cloud), the poet and monk (15th c.); in India the holy folly was known as *baul*, which literally means “wind-affected”, that is “mad”. The *bauls* were religious penchants who disclaimed their attachment to any traditional school of thought. They affirmed their passionate feelings for the divine via songs, dance and music. *Bauls* were wanderers, “spiritual troubadours”, as Feuerstein (1991: 31) likes to call them, roving in Bengal in shabby clothes, showing disdain for conventional life. Divine madness has also been recognised in Sufism, particularly the Malamati group (9th c.).

The parallels which one may draw between the Orthodox Christian holy foolery and other religions are of paramount importance for the current study, for they enable us to outline the archetypal features of *iurodstvo*. The paradigm applied when describing divine foolery, bears a

¹⁷That holy foolery is not an innately Russian phenomenon is a foregone conclusion. Albeit this tradition exists in the Byzantine, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu realms of culture, only in Russia the holy fool was elevated to a position of canonical saint and social mentor. *Iurodivyi* is a Russian ‘national figure’, which is reflected in the scope of research. Kobets (2008: 491) points at the discrepancy between scholarly interest among Russian and Western investigators.

striking resemblance to principal characteristics of Tibetan ‘mad lamas’ (*smyon-pa*) which, *inter alia*, involve a rejection of conventional behaviour, a penchant for wearing eccentric garment, a deliberate negligence in recognition of other person’s social and spiritual status, a refusal to accept scholarly knowledge, an extensive employment of riddles, metaphors and sharp ripostes, as well as the use of scatological humour and obscene acts so as to commence personal chance of the ‘viewer’. As another focal similarity, one might consider the existence and realisation of the Orthodox Christian *apatheia* (‘equanimity’) in the Catholic Church, introduced by the German mystic Meister Eckhart who names it *glāzenheit* (‘letting go’), and in Hinduism, which recognises the same attitude as the *sama-darshana* (‘vision of sameness’). In Feuerstein’s conception, holy foolery acquires a new, cross-cultural dimension.

It is worth recalling that Alexander Y. Syrkin in his article “On the Behaviour of the ‘Fool for Christ’s Sake” recognises an analogy between forms of religious behaviour in the Orthodox Christian Church and in Hinduism.¹⁸ On the basis of Hinduistic tradition, he delineates three stages of transition that lead towards the highest sanctity: first, the “acceptance” of the world, along with obedience to the commonly acclaimed values (Hindi: ‘*gr̥hastha*’ i. e. ‘staying at home’); second, “non-acceptance”, i. e. renunciation (Hindi: ‘*saṃnyāsin*’) of previously accepted norms, with simultaneous retreat into seclusion (Hindi: ‘*vānaprastha*’, i.e. ‘go to the forest’); and third, the state of ultimate bliss (Hindi: ‘*brāhmaṇa*’), where the dichotomy between “acceptance” and “non-acceptance” ceases to exist. This phase is called *neutralisation*, as

¹⁸Significantly, the scheme provided by Syrkin bears a striking structural resemblance to patterns established by Turner. In his seminal work *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, Victor Turner, endeavours to construe the universals of performance in myth, ritual and drama. The British anthropologist worked out a theoretical framework on the foundation of *rites de passage* concept, initially formulated by the Belgian folklorist Arnold Van Gannep. As stated by the latter (Turner 1977: 36), rites of passage (transition), understood as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age”, have a “tripartite processual structure”, namely separation, margin (*limen*) and re-aggregation. The second phase is characterised by ‘in-betweenness’, and those who undergo this process “evade ordinary cognitive classification (...) they are neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other” (op. cit., 37). In his treatise, Turner (1990: 8) develops this paradigm and transposes it into the context of social drama. According to the scholar, the process unfolds in the following stages: *Separation* (Breach, i.e. distortion of commonly accepted rules, and *Crisis*, i.e. the emergence of latent incongruities), *Redressive Process* (liminality) and *Reaggregation*, which results in either reintegration or recognition of irreparable schism. Turner never mentions the phenomenon of holy foolery, yet his analysis proves very productive in the current study and shall be referred to in the chapters treating *iurodstvo* as a spectacle. At this point, one might claim that although seemingly akin at a cursory glance, Turner’s and Syrkin’s paradigms differ in one salient point. If liminality, for the former, is peculiar to the second phase, then for the latter it is the third stage (it should be acknowledged that, although Syrkin never uses the word ‘liminal’, the way he describes this stage allows us to employ it). Interestingly, for both researchers, the liminal phase constitutes the most potent force. Given careful consideration, the above-mentioned paradigms do not need to be contradictory, if we assume that they explicate the same phenomenon from diverse angles. It should be born in mind that Turner’s analysis refers to performance *per se* (a phenomenon which for the purpose of the present paper would be referred to as *iurodstvovanie*), whereas Syrkin’s explication applies to rites of personal transition of *iurodivy*. In other words, Turner’s theory is of great value for elaborations on the *extrinsic* (secular) component of holy foolery, while Syrkin puts forward insightful ideas about the *intrinsic* (sacred) nature of the phenomenon.

Syrkin puts it, and denotes the synergy of two values at the opposite side of the spectrum. Similarly, the *iurodivyi* leaves his/her shelter and embarks on an ‘errand of mercy’, conducts himself inappropriately from both the laymen’s and monk’s standpoint, and returns equanimous to the fuss and tumult of the world.

The typological similarity of *iurodstvo* and the ethical values and practice of Indian Jogism was the subject of V.V. Ivanov’s study.¹⁹ He emphasises the parallel between the New Testament: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5, 43-44) and *Ahimsa*, the ethical code of Hindu philosophy, first formulated by Patañjali in his work *Yogasūtra*. Not only does the concept of *ahimsa* imply a totally non-violent attitude towards all living creatures, but also love for any form of life. Ivanov compares components of religious practice, which leads him to the conclusion that both *iurodivye* and yogis share a common ground. Among analogies he mentions are, *inter alia*, nakedness, ecstatic states, tolerance of extreme heat/cold, and equanimity. Interestingly, Hindi anthologies mark the irreverent behaviour, senseless acts and gestures that bear more than a passing resemblance to *iurodstvo*.

1.6 The Literary Perspective

Both Russian and Western scholars have investigated the significance of the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* from a literary standpoint.²⁰ As David M. Bethea (2012: 173) maintains, the holy in Christ is a potential literary figure due to the fact that one protagonist embodies the principle of iconic liminality. The “civil disobedience” that he performs, draws him out the social ambit and provokes his degradation and marginalisation. The ambiguity *iurodivyi* engenders makes the reader decide whether s/he is dealing with inspired or infernal wisdom. The reader ceases to be a passive recipient, and must decide for themselves whether the simpleton (fool)

¹⁹ Although semiotics of religion was not the scientific crux of the publication, it is worth mentioning. Ivanov’s book, *Disgrace of Beauty: Dostoevsky and Russian Iurodstvo* (1993), shall be discussed at length in the later sections of the present study.

²⁰ The thematic importance of *iurodstvo* in Russian history is undeniable. In the course of Russian literary history one may find multifarious applications of holy foolery, for example Vladimir Odoevskii’s *Russian Nights* (*Russkie nochi*, 1844), Nikolai Gogol’s *Nevskii Avenue* (*Nevskii prospect*, 1835), Fedor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1867), *Idiot* (1869), *The Devils* (*Besy*, 1872), *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat’ia Karamazovy*, 1880), Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), Sasha Sokolov’s *School of Fools* (*Shkola dlia durakov*, 1960s), Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line* (*Moskva-Petushki*, 1969-70), Grigorii Gorin’s *That Very Munchhausen* (*Tot samyi Miunkhausen*, 1979), Svetlana Vasilenko’s *Little Fool* (*Durochka*, 1998), Anatolii Korolev’s *Tongue-Man* (*Chelovek-iazyk*, 2000), Boris Evseev’s *The Holy Fool* (*Iurod*, 2001) and Liudmila Ulitskaia’s *Seven Saints from the Briukho Village* (*Semero sviatykh iz derevni Briukho*, 2008).

represents a genuine prophet who possesses the divine truth, expressed by means of paradox, laughter and apophysis, or s/he is just a professional buffoon.

Ewa M. Thompson (1973) investigates the archetypal features of foolery in Russian literature. She draws some parallels between the Western tradition of buffoonery and the Russian *Ivanushka durachok*, yet highlights that, unlike picaresque heroes, *Ivanushka* succeeds due to his ignorance. Moreover, he lacks self-awareness, which makes him unable to reflect upon his immoral behaviour. Following Viacheslav Ivanov, Thompson underlines the connection between holy foolery and the gnostic tradition. She maintains that *iurodstvo* has been a leitmotif throughout centuries of Russian literature – from Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nekrasov to Pasternak, Olesha and Kazakov.

The paradigm of Russian *iurodstvo* has been studied in the light of Dostoevsky's works.²¹ One of the most cited monographs in that field is *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* by Harriet Murav (1992). The author examines the development of the *iurodivyi* topos in Dostoevsky's novels on the basis of Sonia Marmeladova (*Crime and Punishment*), Prince Myshkin (*The Idiot*), Maria Lebiadkina and Semen Iakovlevich as pseudo-holy fools (*The Devils*) and Alesha Karamazov and Zosima (*The Brothers Karamazov*). Murav (1992: 172) advocates that in the nineteenth century, the perception of the holy foolery was strongly influenced by psychology, with its crucial categories of normality and abnormality.

Even though the juxtaposition of the tradition and modern culture has no clear upshot, it resulted in the coexistence of competing paradigms. From its background position in *Crime and Punishment*, *iurodstvo* attained a more significant role in *The Idiot*, to reach its apex in *The Brothers Karamazov*. *The Devils*, in turn, depict the demonic aspect of holy foolery. Still, Murav's assertion that the holy fool in the works of Dostoevsky is "by no means a transparent source of blessing", has proved itself to be a bone of contention among scholars. Thus, Kobets (2011: 37) calls this statement "an erroneous generalisation", while Diane O. Thompson (1994: 630-631) maintains that "Murav reduces Dostoevsky's Christianity to little more than holy foolishness, a serious misapprehension which slights the Christological basis of his art and thought".

Murav's categorisation of fools ("ascetics masquerading as fools and madmen, madmen allegedly venerated as holy men, and madmen treated as madmen (...) do not represent hard

²¹ It is noteworthy that Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *Fools for Christ*, presents works of six thinkers that commented on the relation of Christianity and the problem of value. One of them is Dostoevsky, who according to the author can be recognised as a fool for Christ. Pelikan (1995: 83) corroborates that it is madness which allowed Dostoevsky to identify and grasp the elusive and most profound implications of the Christian gospel.

and fast distinctions, but, rather, held to map out a continuum” (1992: 3f. in Børtnes 1995: 19)), was a departure point in Jostein Børtnes’ study of the textual and semiotic values of the term *iurodivyi* in Dostoevsky’s four major novels.²² Børtnes draws a distinction between protagonists with ‘unmarked’ or ‘zero-meaning’ foolery, where the quality of sanctity or holiness is absent, and a ‘marked’ meaning of *iurodivyi*, where holiness is present.²³ In addition, he corroborates that Dostoevsky’s use of the term holy fool is always marked, yet two-edged, i.e. it may describe both a folly for Christ’s (cf. Zosima, Alesha) and the Devil’s (cf. Fedor Pavlovich) sake. As a consequence, Dostoevskian characters might fall into the category of *iurodivyi* proper (Christomorphic figures, neither of whom is depicted as mad) or *unholy iurodivyi* (who are mentally or physically handicapped, blatant liars). In the light of Børtnes’s reinterpretation of the term *iurodivyi*, Murav’s three categories of “madmen” are imperfect, as all follies included in her paradigm would belong to the same group of *unholy fools*, advocates the scholar.

Another contribution to the discussion on the applicability of the holy foolish paradigm to Dostoevskii’s works is *The Disgrace of Beauty: Dostoevskii and The Russian Iurodstvo* (1993) by Vasilii Ivanov. In his analysis, the author shares common ground with Likhachev and Panchenko when it comes to the terminology, on the one hand, but also manages to widen and enlarge it, on the other (cf. “conclave”, a poetical term associated with the *iurodivyi*’s travel or “amplification”, understood as an “intensification” of literary characters and positions). Also, Bakhtin’s time-honoured concepts of “threshold” and “square” become enriched by Ivanov by means of “the Way”-notion (i.e. the *iurodivyi*’s imaginary journey to the realm of the sacred). Ivanov accentuates the dichotomous nature of *iurodstvo* and the need for an explicit distinction between the hagiographical *saloj* and the literary holy fools. Nonetheless, he emphasises that the terminology we employ in the literary context is rooted in the traditional classification of *iurodstvo*.²⁴

²² Further references to Børtnes’s analyses of Dostoevskii’s works include: Børtnes, J. 1983. The Last Delusion in an Infinite Series of Delusions: Stavrogin and the Symbolic structure of *The Devils*. *Dostoevsky Studies* 4, pp. 53-56, and Børtnes J. 1994. Dostoevskii’s *Idiot* or the Poetics of Emptiness. *Scando-Slavica*, 40, pp. 5-14.

²³ It is worth recalling that in 1864, a radical ethnographer, Ivan Gavrilovich Pryzhov, divided holy fools into two categories, namely ‘the genuine *iurodivye*’ and the so-called ‘*lzheiudivye*’ (false *iurodivye*). The former were characterised as mentally disturbed, while the latter, as two-faced charlatans. Significantly, his classification excludes holiness as a part of the phenomenon (see Børtnes, op. cit., p. 26).

²⁴ Interestingly, one of the two supplements to the above-mentioned book *Disgrace of Beauty: Dostoevskii and Russian Iurodstvo* is the author’s polemic against the work of Tatiana Goricheva, *Orthodoxy and Postmodernism* (1991). Vasilii Ivanov takes issue with Goricheva (1991: 48) over her interpretation of *iurodstvo*, advocating that her claim that *iurodstvo* genetically descends from the school of cynics and that the convergence of holy foolery and cynicism makes a typological parallel, is a serious misapprehension and simplification.

Ivanov's typology is, up to a certain extent, in consonant with Børtnes's. He also differentiates between the holy fool hero (*iurodivyi geroi*), who is characterised by unique spatial and temporal constraints, as well as by a special type of awareness, while the extrinsic features of *iurodstvo*, in this case, become reduced and therefore less significant, embodied by Prince Myshkin, Arkadii Dolgorukov and Alesha Karamazov, *innate iurodivyi (prirodnoe iurodstvo)* represented by Sonia Marmeladova, monks Ferafont and Varsonofii in *The Karamazovs Brothers*, *quasi-iurodivyi (lozhnoe iurodstvo)*, *iurodivyi-jester (iurodivyi-shut)*, such as Mariia Lebiadkina and Lizaveta Smerdiashchaia. According to Ivanov, those characters who do not fall into either of the above-mentioned categories but make discernible allusions to the paradigm of *iurodstvo*, are called funny people (*smeshnoi chelovek*, pl. *liudi*) – Father Zosima, partially Raskol'nikov, Versilov and the main character in *Bobok*.²⁵

Literary and visual representation of female *iurodivye* is the angle from which Helena Goscilo presents the phenomenon of holy foolery. In her article, "Madwomen without Attics: The Crazy Creatrix and the Procreative Iurodivaia" (2007), Goscilo analyses the depiction of divine fools on the basis of material ranging from turn-of-the-century-works to the modern period. Notably, the underlying pattern is that *iurodivyi-like* heroes are often characterised as emphatically spiritual, introspective and touched by madness, which is a "mark of superiority in an epistemological and ontological system removed from the norms of 'this world'" (Goscilo 2007: 232). In this prism, insanity is perceived as a gateway to 'the other', better world. Nevertheless, in the case of female holy fools, the creative madness is transformed into "psychobiological aberration" which includes rape and pregnancy motifs (Goscilo 2007: 232). Goscilo's (2007: 237) contemplation of the significance of *iurodivaia-like* protagonist in film and fiction bring her to a conclusion that female characters are positioned as mediums of salvation that are capable of most radical spiritual exploit, on the one hand, and recreate a world order thanks to "logic-defying procreation", on the other.

The interrelationship between holy foolishness and buffoonery in Russian literature is the focus of Ivan Esaulov's article "Two Facets of Comedic Space in Russian Literature of the Modern Period" (2004). The author endeavours to delimit those two cultural patterns in the realm of fiction, as well as to show their use in literary criticism. The analysis allows Esaulov to conclude that a buffoon's actions fall within the ambit of the Law, viz, his actions cannot transcend the level of deviancy specified in the Law, whereas a holy fool aims at attaining Grace (2004: 75). This assumption serves for the scholar as a favourable departure point for a

²⁵ For more references on Dostoevsky's holy foolish protagonists see Kobets 2011, p. 38.

demarcation between a buffoonish and a holy-foolish protagonist. Nevertheless, if these two categories were distinguishable in the pre-Soviet period, later on they both became a means of opposition to the totalitarian authorities.

1.7 The Reverse and Anthropological Perspectives

N. N. Rostova (2010) accentuates the importance of iconic liminality in *iurodstvo*. The term was introduced by the Russian priest, philosopher and polymath Pavel Florensky in his essay “Reverse Perspective” (1920). Russia’s unknown da Vinci, as Pyman calls Florensky, contemplates the connection between the perspective and perception of an artwork, as well as the interrelationship between art and theology as realised in the icon. He embraces the concept of reverse perspective as a formal mode of depiction, and “means to escape from the quotidian in a way analogous to how holidays disrupt everyday time” (Tugendhaft 2009: 1) The icon, which “stands in glaring contradiction to the rules of linear perspective” (Florensky 2002: 201), is the representation of the transcendental, “sensuously unavailable”, to cite Florensky (2000: 125). Thanks to the implementation of polycentrism, i.e. “the composition constructed as if the eye were looking at different parts of it, while changing its position” (op. cit., p. 204), the viewer is offered a multiplicity of vantage points, since there is no one particular perspectival centre. This approach excludes solipsism, and enables to depict reality and religious experience as shared and objective (op. cit., p. 5). Florensky calls this notion “shared reality”.

With Florensky’s theory of “Reverse Perspective” in mind, let us return to Rostova’s work. To Rostova, the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* is interesting in at least three aspects: firstly, as a new anthropological category – “a man of a reverse perspective”, together with “a man of transition” (Smirnov 2006), “a man of border” (Khoruzhyi), and “an autist” (F. Girenok); secondly, as an embodiment of an icon, driven by “loving reason” (*serdechnyi um*), firmly set within the Russian *Weltanschauung*; and thirdly, as a gateway to “the Russian world of madness”, which differs markedly from Foucault’s examination of insanity in European culture. For the sake of the present study, the notion of the man of a reverse perspective proves to be most productive. As Rostova (2010: 116) convincingly demonstrates, the *iurodivyi*, just like an icon, turns the acclaimed order upside down. The holy fool has his point of reference in the Absolute (the Divine Being), hence spiritual concepts gain primacy at the expense of earthly principles (God vs I, faith vs reason, vigilance vs sleep, image vs word, the inner vs the outer, cult vs culture). His way of conduct can be referred to as “anti-behaviour”, to cite Uspensky (1985: 326), who defines it as “reverse, upturned overthrown standards of behaviour, i.e. the shift of the regulatory norms into their opposites”. This breakdown of categories brings us to

Eliade's notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites), which implies that the incomprehensible transcendence can be explicated by means of oxymorons and antithetical metaphors. Similarly, *iurodstvo* can be understood with reference to *via negationis* (by way of denial), that is by describing what holy foolery is *not*, rather than by defining what it is. Rostova's dissertation is a valuable contribution to the research on *iurodstvo*, due to the fact that she encompasses two fundamental theories in her study – the semiotics of laughter and Florensky's reverse perspective, which not only are mutually corroborating but also broaden the spectrum of investigation.

The apophatic dimension of holy foolishness was also investigated by Wodzinski (2000). The monograph has a twofold structure, a diachronic and a topic-based. Wodzinski presents the history of *iurodstvo ab ovo*, that is, from its etymology, as well as studies the phenomenon through some particular anthropological categories of *iurodstvo*, such as presence, body, speech, tsar, as well as play. Holy foolery is investigated from many standpoints, and numerous quotations from saints' *vita* complement the theoretical material. The scientific crux of the monograph is the apophatic nature of *iurodstvo*, and Wodzinski's work corroborates the thesis that the holy fool verges on the ridiculous and the sublime, balances between *sacrum* and *profanum*, oscillates between the earthly and the otherworldly. The myriad of antithetic, mutually exclusive elements fuse in the persona of the *iurodivyi*, making him the axis mundi of two realities – the Russian Orthodox Church (the official culture) and the popular and carnivalesque culture (non-culture). Praiseworthy as it is, Wodzinski's monograph remains unknown, due to the absence of a translation into English. Still, it should be acknowledged that in 2012 the volume was rendered into French.²⁶

The incongruous nature of *iurodstvo* was also emphasized by N. Berdiaev in *The Russian Idea* (1999). According to him, the *salós* should be regarded as a microcosm of Russian mindset and mental construct, which is said to be a combination of seemingly irreconcilable elements. Berdiaev (1999: 7) highlights its antithetical character, stating that Russians can enchant and disillusion, evoke loving and loathing feelings, as well as be completely unpredictable. Russia's interim position between the East and the West appears to be reflected in the traits of character of its citizens. The incompatibilities inherent in Russian culture are striking; if we were to place Dionysian spontaneity, independence, goodness, docility, sensitivity, inner freedom, messianism, piety, humbleness and slavery on one hemisphere, then on the other we would find

²⁶ Cf. Wodzinski, Cezary. 2012. *Saint Idiot: Projet d'anthropologie apophatique*, Erik Veaux (tr.), Paris: de La Difference.

the monastic and homoeostatic church, cruelty, propensity to violence, despotism, anarchy and the country's hypertrophy, hypocrisy, impersonal collectivism, megalomania, atheism, impetuosity and rebellion. All these qualities form an intricate system of connections.

1.8 The Holistic Approach

Contemporary research on holy foolery is dominated by a holistic approach. As a result, many scholars investigate this phenomenon from formal, critical, comparative and analytical standpoints. Among the scholars who have endeavoured to depict the cultural importance of *iurodstvo* is Ewa M. Thompson (1987). Her monograph presents the phenomenon against the backdrop of Russian culture and history. Thompson's conclusion that the emergence of holy foolishness is "the superimposition of folk tradition (shamanism) on Russian Orthodoxy" (Thompson 1987: 176) proved itself to be a bone of contention among numerous scholars.²⁷ According to Thompson, the transgression between pagan and Christian elements resulted in equating "*iurodstvo* with saintliness even when it was praised by people who could not by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as followers of the Christian value system" (Thompson 1987: 95). Another highly disputable assertion by Thompson is that holy foolishness took a toll on the "national mindset" and influenced Russian self-esteem. She maintains that "the remarkable toleration of state supervision of all areas of Russian life may be grounded not only in Marxist dialectic but also in the memory of the dialectic of holy foolishness, which implied acceptance of the brutality of means provided the intention was 'good', and which exalted the homeless wanderers who rejected all 'structured' social obligations" (Thompson, op. cit., 175). Although seemingly plausible, the theory is hardly corroboratory, mainly because "the national character" cannot be shaped solely by a single phenomenon.

It is also worth mentioning Daniel Rancour-Laferriere (1995), who in his volume *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* comes to similar conclusions as Thomson, yet his treatise is based on different premises. He advocates his provocative hypothesis that Russian culture is determined by a "need to suffer,"²⁸ and that the "Russian soul" has innate characteristics of a slave. To corroborate his theory, he cites numerous writers, such as Vasilii Grossman, Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Voznesenskii, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, to name the most prominent ones. Interestingly, Rancour-Laferriere goes as far as mentioning the American psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler who defines a class of masochistic neurotics as "injustice collectors". Whether this claim can be asserted is a subject for another treatise. The

²⁷ Cf. Kobets 2011 and Fiene, Donald M. 1988.

²⁸ The phrase originates from *The Diary of a Writer* (1873) by Dostoevsky, cited in Rancour-Laferriere 1995: 2.

undeniable fact is that “Russia had a greater respect for the rags of the holy fool than a golden brocade of the courtier” (Kireevsky 1984: 232). Consequently, humility and meekness, with a tendency to self-immolation, have well-established roots in the Russian Weltanschauung.

The corpus of studies on *iurodstvo* also includes *Language, Canonization and Holy Foolishness: Studies in Post-Soviet Culture and the Orthodox Tradition* (2009) by Per-Arne Bodin. Through the prism of contemporary culture, Bodin conducts a fascinating study of the vivid connection between the Russian Orthodox tradition, on the one hand, and postmodern culture on the other. In his treatise, the author relies on Foucault’s concepts of discourse and construction, as well as on discoveries of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School.

Bodin devotes two chapters to the investigation of holy foolery *per se*, yet it is a recurring theme in the whole book. He analyses lives of Soviet-era *saloi*, who have been later officially recognised as saints, to conclude that the tradition of *iurodstvo* constitutes both traditional church and Soviet discourses (Kobets 2011: 166). The second chapter is a case study of the cult of Ksenia of St. Petersburg and its discursive characteristics. Bodin allots much attention to the scholarly discourse on the dynamic relationship between holy foolery and postmodern culture.²⁹ The interplay between these notions will be discussed later on in this section, but at this point it is important to mention Ruth Coates (2011: 112) who notices an interesting, yet rather predictable tendency, represented by Orthodox commentators, to demarcate clearly between holy foolery as a religious phenomenon, and postmodernism as a secular one.

A recent study on holy foolery by Hunt and Kobets (eds.) (2011) is treasure trove of research on *iurodstvo*. The volume is wonderfully eclectic, as it comprises thought-provoking research and renderings of Panchenko’s classical texts on holy foolery. The former is a diligent and informative overview of the existing scholarship on the issue. The gem of this compilation is that it shows the shifts in the bicentenary scholarship on *iurodstvo*; the multiplicity of approaches are legion, ranging from ecclesiastical, secular, postmodern to holistic. The latter elucidates for the researcher the peculiarities of Isaakii’s *vita*. In her works, Kobets offers a multidimensional cultural analysis of *iurodstvo*, and by doing so she proves that the phenomenology of holy foolishness is an inexhaustible source of artistic inspiration.

²⁹ Per-Arne Bodin gives an even broader account of this issue in his article “Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture” (see Kobets, Svitlana – Priscilla Hunt. 2011. *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers), pp. 353-372.

1.9 Postmodernism and Holy Foolery

As has been mentioned before, a considerable body of research devoted to the interface between holy foolery and postmodernism has been conducted over the last decades. Many scholars maintain that the paradigm of *iurodstvo* is identifiable in post-Soviet literature, as well as the strategies of Russian avant-garde culture.³⁰

Cultural philosophers find holy foolery immensely generative, when elucidating the postmodern discourse. The corpus of present-day studies on *iurodstvo* is still indebted to the Bakhtinian concept of the dichotomised nature of low (carnavalesque) and high (official) culture. Given that postmodernism and *iurodstvo* share a number of typological characteristics (anti-aestheticism, liminality, ambiguity and theatricalisation), many critics are tempted to implement the paradigm of divine foolery in their research on modern culture.

Tatiana Goricheva (1991) uses the term *iurodstvo* to discuss postmodernism, which, in her understanding, is not merely a period following modernism but a “cultural position independent of time and historical development” (Goricheva 1991: 57). She maintains that both *iurodstvo* and postmodernism defy conventions and belie logical reasoning, emphasising the primacy of inner intuition. Both notions are, ipso facto, deeply apophatic. This approach had a major impact on a number of scholars, who are also inclined to investigate postmodern culture through the prism of holy foolery. Suffice it to mention Mark Lipovetsky, for whom *iurodstvo* means postmodernism and vice versa, and S. I. Malen’kikh, who advocates that inasmuch as holy fool may be regarded a “hero of our time”, contemporary art can be explicated by means of *iurodstvo*.

For the former, the common feature of both notions is their kenotic dimension. The contemporary writer, just as the *iurodivyi*, tries to pick up the pieces of fragmentary reality, to bring them to the mass consciousness (1997: 176). Postmodernism, in his opinion, is a “life strategy, literary style, and narrative technique” (Lipovetsky 1997: 45). Malen’kikh, in turn, corroborates the thesis that in the world of simulacra the only access to authenticity is through madness. Contemporary art, by the same token as *iurodstvo*, uses anti-aestheticism to convey the message. Similarly, the prominent Russian academic Mikhail Epstein is of the opinion that *iurodstvo* is crucial for understanding not only postmodern culture, but also the avant-garde movement:

³⁰ On investigation of the interrelationship between holy foolery and *iurodstvo* see “Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture” by Per-Arne Bodin, “The Pathos of Holy Foolishness in the Leningrad Underground” by Marco Sabbatini, and “From Stylization to Parody: The Paradigm of Holy Foolishness (*iurodstvo*) in Contemporary Russian Performance Art” by Laura Piccolo in Hunt-Kobets (eds.), 2011. op. cit.

The avant-garde is art of the *iurodstvo* vein that deliberately seeks to humiliate and mutilate its aesthetic countenance, even to the extent of substituting a sculpture for a pissoir at an exhibition. (Epstein 1994: 33)

Still, Nikolaeva takes issue with such a stance, arguing that postmodernism is devoid of any religious connotations whatsoever, while holy foolery is determined by religion. She advocates:

Thus, certain theatrical, ludic and behavioural components of *iurodstvo* distantly recall postmodern performances. The holy fool's "theatre", however, is intended to praise God, whereas postmodern manipulations reside entirely within the interests of a human self that has severed its bonds with the Creator and Saviour of the world. (Nikolaeva 1999)

Indeed, postmodern culture uses the term *iurodstvo* very eagerly, often neglecting its initial meaning. The Christian topos has fallen out of the ambit of modern culture, yet is still present on the subconscious level.³¹ Holy foolery is invoked in cultural discourse so frequently that it ceases to denote any values (Shalin 1996). Dimitrii Shalin challenges Epstein's stance, too, when claiming that he "reads an ideological core or a Christian message into works that more or less explicitly lack this centre" (Shalin 1996, in Bodin 2011: 366).

Nevertheless, the active use of holy foolish behavioural code in contemporary art seems to be diluted. As Piccolo (2011: 375) points out, "*iurodstvo* is reduced to a thin rubber mask to be worn whenever needed, by anyone". Also Shalin (1996) maintains that one should be rather careful while embracing this term, since a fool for Christ and a postmodern author stand for two different realms. If the former is to represent the divine, then the latter simply denotes the artist. Similarly, Goricheva (1991: 49) states that the path of holy foolishness may be solely a way of escaping the definition and responsibility, and gives a possibility to an artist protect herself/himself behind the mask of madness. Some go as far as to claim that the notion of holy foolery is nowadays reduced to an empty slogan.

Nevertheless, Epstein (2012: 5-6) definitely has a point when he maintains that Russia's culture is under the prevailing influence of the apophatic tradition, that is explicates phenomena by way of denial. In his opinion, this is the upshot of Russia's adoption of the dualistic, Platonic approach that implies a split between the material and the ideal ambits. By contrast, Europe had chosen Aristotle's, who mediated between the extremities of the ideal and the material. In other words, the Russian realm is organised according to the binary structure, whereas the West is dominated by the ternary system. However highly disputed, this view of Russian cultural history seems to be generative for the purpose of the present study. Dichotomy, as Epstein

³¹ On the religious unconscious see, Ch. 2, pp. 37-38 of the present thesis.

views it, has innate potential to produce revolution, rather than trigger gradual development. Consequently, one can speak of *artistic apophatism* in Russia, which is observable from Gogol onwards. The logic of inversion comes into force, and consequently, “insufficiency becomes excess” and “the not-quite-human is passed off as superhuman”. Epstein concludes that the “Russian tendency” to omit the interim, human sphere and to combine *sacrum* and *profanum* leads to self-immolation. Similarly, *iurodstvo* is an opaque fusion of infinite self-abasement and the highest pride.

To recapitulate, the current chapter has introduced the historical tradition of holy foolishness and discuss major topics in the scholarly literature about this phenomenon. As we could see, a considerable body of research is devoted to religious, historico-hagiographical, semiotic, perennial, literary, anthropological and postmodern aspects of holy foolery. This relatively broad perspective may lead us to a conclusion that the inverted world of anti-behaviour characteristic of *iurodivye* proves to be immensely productive in elucidation of modern Russian culture. The implementation of the holy fool paradigm into the realm of literature, film and performative arts sets in motion an open-ended discourse between the piece of art and a recipient, as it champions polycentrism over solipsism. Consequently, *iurodstvo*, understood as an artistic device, opens a new avenue for interpreting modern culture.

Furthermore, the study on *iurodstvo* re-invokes a tantalising question of the dichotomous Weltanschauung of Russia. The bipolarity is a source of considerable friction, whose force is channelled into revolutionary artistic acts.

Chapter 2 Socio-political art

This chapter is based on the premise that holy foolery is an important component in the artistic strategy of Russian socio-political art. In the initial sections of the present chapter, I will try to test the plausibility of this assumption. To achieve this, I shall briefly describe major characteristics of late Soviet and contemporary Russian activism, to demonstrate its subsequent metamorphosis. This historical account will show that, irrespective of the political changes, the non-conformist protest movement in Russia displays a number of holy foolish characteristics.

In the context of modern culture, *iurodstvo* may attain a figurative meaning and is therefore considered “a deliberate effort to appear like a holy fool” (Efremova 2006), or a “senseless, mad, absurd action that could only be committed by a (holy) fool” (Chernykh 2006: 461). In this context, the behavioural model of an activist or a performer reveals close affinity to *iurodstvo* in numerous aspects, such as social periphery, in-betweenness, alternative behaviour, nakedness.

This theoretical account will serve as a convenient departure point for my discussion of the actions of Petr Pavlenskii, which form the main thrust of this chapter. In order to unpick Pavlenskii’s utterances, I am going to introduce a triad of binary oppositions (centre – periphery, absence – presence, horizontal – vertical) that shall serve as an analytical instrument in the present chapter. The analysis will be expanded by Pavlenskii’s own comments on his art and lifestyle, made during my interview with him in April 2015 in St Petersburg.

2.1 Activism in the Late Soviet Period³²

Since Soviet unofficial culture has a long tradition that goes way beyond the scope of the present thesis, I will restrict myself to minor yet indicative activist movements. The analysis is based on two groups, the Mit’ki and the Necrorealists, which are representative of a major cultural shift that took place in Soviet Russia.

The non-conformist activist movement of the late Soviet period was an answer to the general paradox of the system – a “total liberation by means of total control” (Yurchak 2006: 284). Yurchak, following Austin, distinguishes between the “constative” and “performative” meanings of the authoritative discourse. If the former denotes facts and reality (and can be true or false), then the latter stands for usage of words to realise actions (and can be neither true nor

³²Russian non-conformist movement has been studied from various perspectives: for a literary account, see Marco Sabbatini, “The Pathos of Holy Foolishness in the Leningrad Underground” in: Hunt—Kobets (eds) 2011. *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, pp. 337-352; for an artistic account, see John E. Bowlt, “The Neo-Russian Style” in: Rzhovsky (ed.) 2012. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, pp. 213-249.

false). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the authoritative discourse became hypernormalised.³³ Therefore, the role of the performative dimension grew in importance at the expense of the constative meaning, which lost its value as a referential instrument and consequently became open to reinterpretation.

Interestingly, the performative shift, in Yurchak's (2006: 286) terms, spurred creative innovation. In other words, the 'interstices' of official structures (Starr 1995: 13) enabled a different reality (i.e., the reality that did not fall into the ambit of ideology) to "explode into the Soviet word in powerful, multiple and unanticipated forms" (Yurchak 2006).

The enabling function of the authoritative discourse becomes more evident if we look at its realisation in a particular genre of absurdist humour (referred to as *stiob* in Russia), which is "a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humour. It required such a degree of *overidentification*³⁴ with the object, person or idea at which it was directed that it is often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two" (Fitzpatrick 2006: 19). The aesthetics of *stiob* also includes *decontextualisation*, which can be defined as positioning an item of the authoritative discourse into an unsuitable or unexpected context. Consequently, a decontextualized symbol loses its initial iconicity and may seem perplexing and/or absurd.

It is worthy of note that the practitioners of Soviet *stiob* did not restrict themselves to spatial or temporal bounds, or publicly approved festivals. Instead, their practices evolved into a "total art of living" (Yurchak 2006: 250), which implies that the main artistic focus was given to a peculiar lifestyle (the *stiob* philosophy included ritualised speech practices, behavioural code, unhealthy diet and drinking habits), rather than the traditional ways of expression, such as paintings, film or planned provocations.

Stiob actions, just as *iurodstvo*, placed themselves 'vne', i.e. in the border zone between the "inside and [the] outside [of the] Soviet authoritative discourse and both within the Soviet spatial universe but *not within* its discursive parameters" (Yurchak 2006: 250). This in-betweenness became the main characteristic of unofficial art during late socialism, but it would

³³Yurchak (2006: 75) elaborates on this term. He points out that in the absence of "external voice that provided metadiscussions and evaluations of authoritative discourse, the language structures became increasingly normalised, cumbersome, citational, and circular". Consequently, language became hypernormalised, i.e. no longer accurately reflected reality, and the official discourse was narrowed down to "discursive simulacra" (Baudrillard 1988 in: Yurchak 2006: 75).

³⁴Yurchak (2006: 252) defines it as "an ideologically designed ideal of behaviour", which can also be referred to as "hypercoherence".

be erroneous to interpret it solely as an opposition to the system. Rather, *stiob* was rooted in detached observations betwixt and between the official and the unofficial realms.

Drawing on Yurchak's analysis, one may conclude that ironic aesthetics was increasingly commonplace during late socialism. Interestingly, activism in this period was reminiscent of Russian folklore (cf. the prototypical "wise fool" of Russian fairy tales – Ivan the Fool) and the absurdist humour deeply rooted in Russian literary and artistic tradition. Although activist movements were not indicative of the behavioural code of their times, they should be regarded as symptoms of a profound cultural shift happening in the society. Methods employed by activists bear a striking resemblance to the paradigm of *iurodstvo* – "extraordinary behaviour" (which was almost unheard of for *homo sovieticus*), "dim-witted merriment" and "energetic idiocy" were perceived as "artistic acts" (Vail' – Genis 1996: 196-99, in: Yurchak 2006: 243). It is not only "a peculiar humour of the absurd" (Yurchak 2006: 243) that makes the actionist movement look similar to holy foolery, but also a parodic repudiation of boundaries between seriousness and humour, support and opposition, sense and nonsense that shows a certain aesthetic affinity with *iurodstvo*. By the same token, just as *iurodstvo*, *stiob* involved actions that balanced between irony and genuine concern. They were, as a result, ambiguous and confusing.

Yurchak (2006) investigates the Mit'ki and the Necrorealist groups as examples of activism in the late Soviet period. Mit'ki is a Leningrad group that appeared around 1980. Its members turned their lives into a living aesthetic project. By their grotesque lifestyle (unhealthy diet, collective drinking, ritualised speech dominated by diminutives, grotesque openness and conviviality towards strangers), they deliberately moved themselves out of the socio-political ambit (cf. the notion of 'vne', based on the concept of inside/outside). They refused to partake in the official culture (reading newspapers, watching TV, doing shopping unless necessary), yet they were eager to interact with their compatriots. They bear a striking resemblance to a postmodern detachment from a socio-cultural milieu, but apparently this obliviousness was a symbol of an ironic approval of reality.

The Necrorealists emerged in the late 1970s and consisted of a group of friends performing so-called provocations (*provokatsiia*), i.e. "bizarre events that took place in front of unsuspecting audiences" (Yurchak 2006: 243). They would film these provocations on an 8-mm camera and labelled them necrorealism. Members of the group include such artists as Evgenii Iufit, Vladimir Kustov, Sergei Serp, Leonid Konstantinov, Anatolii Mortukov, Andrei Kurmaiartsev, Evgenii Kondratiev and others. Evgenii Iufit, Vladidmir Kustov and Sergei Serp are still active in Russian cultural life.

The act of provocation plays a significant role in both phenomena, as it initiates a certain form of discourse. “The kinetic phrase”, as Panchenko calls provocation, ignites a non-verbal communication with the aim of involving the uninitiated, upstanding citizens in pranks (brawls), and even more importantly, receives an immediate reply. It is important to recognise a certain paradigm here; provocation, just like a theatrical gesture, attains a symbolic dimension (Panchenko 1984: 79-80) and evolves into a spectacle, which is an interplay between the actionist and the crowd (spectators). As Yurchak (2006: 245) emphasises, “these people were made to face a situation in which what seemed perfectly clear a minute before suddenly stopped making any sense”. Yufit’s description of a brawl that began in the forest to end on a suburban train, illustrates the above-mentioned description:

many passengers would always be dragged into the brawl, not knowing whom they were fighting, for what reason, and what was going on. Once we got some soldiers involved, a whole platoon, together with their officers. I was fighting side by side with a Soviet army major (Yurchak’s interview with Yufit, 2006: 245).

One should not overlook the significant role of spectators in the brawl. The act of provocation changes the social status of both the *stiob* performer and the crowd. In this particular moment their relationship becomes reciprocal. Consequently, the demarcation between social groups ceases to exist, as the downgraded activist becomes equal to obedient citizens (they partake in the same brawl). Importantly, the leading role of the initiator of a *stiob* action is overtaken by its participants, so as a result one person performance becomes a mass (collective) performance.

Yet another interesting aspect to look at is the participants themselves. More often than not, these are law-abiding and righteous people. They symbolise the system, and can metaphorically be treated as representatives of an authoritative discourse (cf. the Soviet army Major in Yufit’s description). Ironically, thanks to the involvement of “serious people”, the artistic act against the regime is assisted and thus accomplished by the regime itself. As we will see in the later section of this chapter, the role of the public confusion and ability to drag the audience into the brawl are also vital for Pavlenskii’s actions.

In the previous sections *stiob* was referred to as a “downgraded” type of action. It is important to elaborate on this concept and explain briefly its origins and ways of realisation. Yurchak (2006), following Agamben (1998), distinguishes between a bare (naked) life and a political life. According to the latter, an individual reaches his/her full worth when s/he possesses both components. Should one be devoid of socio-political life, s/he becomes a less

valuable person.³⁵ Drawing upon Yurchak's analysis, one may conclude that the actionists in the late Soviet period deliberately downgraded themselves to the level of bare life, and became something like *homo sacer*, i.e. individuals expunged from the social ambit, and simultaneously hallowed (to a certain degree). Obviously, late Soviet actionists, just as the modern ones, are eulogists of border aesthetics. They teeter on the epistemological border between life and death, sanity and insanity, citizenship and non-citizenship, the healthy and the forensic, the bare life and the political life. This is how they implement a *vne* relationship with the reality. It is noteworthy that some activists reject the socio-political dimension (e.g. members of the Mit'ki group refused to fit into the dichotomous system of oppression and opposition), while others (e.g. the Necrorealists) surrendered their biopolitical life by blurring the boundary between "the living" (active) and "the dead" (inert), as well as degrading themselves to the so-called bare life.

To recapitulate, the purpose of this section was to offer a brief insight into non-conformist movements in Soviet Russia, as well as to describe the holy foolish components in the behavioural code of unofficial artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The aesthetics of scandalous conduct embraced by activists included civil disobedience, alienation, (seemingly) senseless acts and internal emigration (being *vne*, i.e. simultaneously outside and inside of the system). All these features in essence resemble *iurodstvovanie*, that is, pretending to be a holy fool.

Furthermore, the theoretical account of activism in the late Soviet period is aimed at illustrating how various techniques, conditions, texts and rituals were used in order to generate an unforeseen cultural production. In an odd way, Soviet Russia was a very "postmodern" country, with numerous instances of deconstruction and decontextualisation.

2.2 An Ambiguous Hint of Scandal, or Contemporary Russian Performance Art

While a comparison between Soviet activists and *iurodivye* may seem far-fetched at a cursory glance, the idea that modern artists actively use the paradigm of holy foolery is more tenable. A number of scholars have claimed that divine foolery is indissolubly linked with postmodern culture.³⁶

Within the scope of this section, I would like to present the Moscow Actionism of the 1990s, not only to demonstrate the non-conformist movement as a continuous process, but also

³⁵For a more detailed account of biopolitics, see Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1984) and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998).

³⁶On the connection between postmodernism and *iurodstvo*, see Laura Piccolo 2011, p. 374.

to show that the legacy of holy foolishness still functions as a breeding ground for contemporary art. Since Actionism in Russia is a broad notion endowed with a great capacity for proliferation and transformation that exceed the scope of the present thesis, this section is confined to a short overview of the artists whose artworks are, in my opinion, most representative of this phenomenon. Before embarking on a presentation of such alternative artists as Oleg Kulik and Alexander Brener, Blue Noses (*Sinie nosy*) as well as the E.T.I. and Voina groups, I will briefly comment on the socio-political situation in Russia in the early 1990s.

It goes without saying that the dissolution of the USSR had far-reaching ramifications. Among these, one can name a change of social status of unofficial artists. They found themselves in an artistic vacuum, as they lost their *raison d'être*, i.e. the authoritative discourse that they fought against. At this point, holy foolery re-entered the Russian cultural realm. It should be noted that the early 1990s were a “time of troubles” for many. On the one hand, this period was characterised by elation at regained freedom; on the other, “pandemic madness, combined with end-of-the century irrationalism, postmodernism and the paradigm of *iurodstvo*” could also be observed (Lipovetskii 1995: 205). A possible explanation of this phenomenon is that holy foolery, with its “inherent element of conflict” (Bakhtin 1979: 161), was a perfect match for postmodernism, as both notions defy convention of coherence, erase the boundary between “high” and “low” culture and are of aporetic nature. Both phenomena share elements of anti-aestheticism and kenosis. As highlighted by Malen’kikh (2001: 56), “the holy fool evokes laughter, horror, and disgust. Contemporary art now focuses on the aesthetic ugliness, and writers turn to what evokes horror and revulsion”. Indeed, as we will see, anti-aestheticism is a dominant feature of contemporary performances.

Artists of that period were searching for alternative means of expression, which would enable them to comment on the harsh social and political realities. Since words had lost their denotive (referential) quality, they resorted to using their own bodies as “transmitters” of a message. Clearly, action was at the crux of their activity. By means of their deeds, they would create a “holiday realm”, which interrupted the mundane and was aimed at re-establishing the discourse between the artist and the spectator. Formerly bilateral, the dialog between artists and spectators became multilateral, as *aktsionisty* considered the mass media an indelible part of their performances.

To achieve this, *aktsionisty* used provocation as their main device. Just a few months before the dissolution of USSR, on 18 April 1991, members of E.T.I (Ekspropriatsiia Territorii Iskusstva – Expropriation of Art Territory) lay down on the Red Square forming the swear word *khui* (cock) with their bodies. Interestingly, the performance coincided with the passing of the

April 1991 Law on Morality (Code of Administrative Offences), which forbade using curse words in public places.³⁷ Nonetheless, the group's leader Anatolii Osmolovskii claimed that the crux of the action was to desacralize the Red Square and transform it into a people's place.³⁸ The group became famous when its members initiated a brawl at a restaurant with pie-throwing. Among other noteworthy actions by E.T.I., one can mention *Leopards bursting into a temple* (1992) at Regina Gallery (Moscow) and *After Post-Modernism you can only shout* (1992).³⁹ The former has its roots in an article by Jean Baudrillard, "The leopards burst into the temple and break the holy vessels". For Osmolovskii, the vessels stand for the Russian art tradition and conceptualism, which he considers inadequate and tedious.⁴⁰ The latter action took place in the Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow). Osmolovskii showed a series of 12 photographs in baroque frames presenting faces of screaming artists, accompanied by the sound of each scream.⁴¹

The No Title (*Bez nazvaniia*) group consisting of Brener, Mamonov and Litvin authored a number of well-known performances. In 1993, the group made its first happening on the hundredth anniversary of Mao Zedong's birthday; some members of the group showed pictures of Chairman Mao, whilst Brener was training to the rhythm of military slogans (Piccolo 2011: 379). Another action, *Tongues* (1994), happened on Tverskaia Street in Moscow. Having bought ice-cream at McDonald's, the artists spread it over Brener, who was held by two actionists, only to lick it off him. The most controversial action of the No Title group was *Plagiarism* (1994) at the Pushkin Museum. Brener, repeating "Vincent! Vincent!", publically defecated in front of "Sunflowers" by Vincent van Gogh.

The group disintegrated after this action. Still, Brener continued his oppositional artistic activity. On a cold February day in 1995, the artist, wearing boxing shorts and gloves, showed up at the Execution Square near the Moscow Kremlin, and challenged Yeltsin to a fight by shouting "Yeltsin! Come here! Yeltsin! Come here!" (Akinsha 1995: 167). It was a reaction to the start of the First Chechen War. In 1997, the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam housed yet another scandalous performance by Brener. The artist defaced *Suprematism* by Kazimir Malevich by drawing a dollar sign on the canvas. After an immediate reaction of safety

³⁷ Sergey Gulenkin. 3 June 2015, "Red Square Riots: Performance Art in the Centre of Moscow", *The Calvert Journal*, <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/4190/performance-art-in-red-square-pussy-riot-pyotr-pavlensky> (accessed 12 August 2015).

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Interestingly, Kulik considers "Leopards Bursting into a Temple" the best show he ever curated. Two naked people were placed in a cage with real leopards strolling leisurely around them. "I think this exhibition was a metaphor for everything new and lively that appears in our life. This show gave one a feeling of authenticity in art, something unforgettably important", confessed Kulik in an interview with Valentin D'iakonov (<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/32919/oleg-kulik#>, accessed 21 August 2015).

⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatoly_Osmolovsky (accessed 12 August 2015).

⁴¹ *ibid.*

guards, Brener proclaimed that his deed was a performance, by means of which he wanted to engage in a dialogue with Malevich about corruption in the commercial art world (Earle 2014).⁴²

Performances by Oleg Kulik also fall within the holy foolish paradigm. Mad Dog, the Last Taboo Protected by a Lonely Cerberus (1994) is his most famous work.⁴³ The naked artist on all fours appeared in front of the Moscow Centre for Contemporary Art, kept on a lead by Brener, who shouted “stupid art for stupid people in a stupid country”. This concept of artist-dog was a recurrent element of Kulik’s art, which reached European exhibitions.

Challenge and provocation are Kulik’s main devices. His performances are based on a simple framework; a set of unfolding actions triggers an audience response. Therefore, his works tend to be dangerous and unpredictable, and more often than not provoke a public outcry. In order to describe flows of contemporary art, he violates commonly accepted rules. The dog perspective is a means of self-humiliation, “a conscious falling out of the human horizon” (D’iakonov 2009). In the critical literature on holy foolery a dog is loaded with an immense semiotic significance. Both linguistically and metaphorically, the canine became a trope in Late Antiquity and was connected with the Cynic tradition. Etymologically speaking, the word “Cynic” (*κυνικός*) is said to have been derived from the term *κύων* (dog). Cynics received such a name because they conducted themselves like dogs do; they urinated, defecated, ate, masturbated and copulated in public (Krueger 1996: 101). John Chrysostom refers to dogs as shameless (*ἀνάισχυτος*). Interestingly, both terms *κύων* and *κυνικός* were used to describe Cynics. Thus, St Augustine described Cynics as “canine philosophers” (*philosophi canini*). It needs to be emphasised that the dog symbol has both positive and negative connotations. It can denote “vigilant social criticism”, on the one hand, and erratic behaviour, on the other (Krueger 1996: 103).

The notorious performance “A Young Atheist” (1998) by Avdei Ter-Ogan’ian is an evident deconstruction of St Basil Fool for Christ (1468?-1552?).⁴⁴ The artist exhibited photographs of well-known and cherished Orthodox icons of “Vladimir Mother of God” and “Saviour-not-made-with-human-hands”, only to chop them with an axe. His action was

⁴² Grayson Earle. 2014. “A Moment Outside: A Study of Alexander Brener’s Daring Escape from the Dictates of the Western Art Market”, <http://www.theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/viewFile/173/206> (accessed 13 August 2015).

⁴³ Significant as it is, Kulik’s performance echoes St Symeon’s who, before entering the city of Emensa, tied a dead dog to his belt. Interestingly, Ewald Kislinger interpreted Symeon’s dog as Cerberus, the watchdog of Hades. For Kislinger, the dog is a symbol of “the passage from this world to the other” (1988: 168).

⁴⁴ According to hagiographical sources, St Basil destroyed a miracle-performing icon so as to reveal the devil painted underneath.

supposed to comment on the state-church alliance. The artist was charged under article 282, part 1 of the Criminal Code concerned with a “conduct intended to arouse religious hostility”, and sentenced to prison, which he escaped by claiming political asylum in the Czech Republic in 1999 (Betancourt – Taroutina 2015: 302).

The above-mentioned examples demonstrate the implementation and re-interpretation of the holy foolish behavioural paradigm. Deeds of *iurodivyye* (which are actually interpreted as spectacles of a certain kind) share some distinctive features with postmodern performances. It is clear that both notions act in gross violation of commonly accepted rules. First and foremost, the body seems to be the crux of the action. Nakedness (or semi-nakedness) appears to be especially productive in this context, as on the one hand it connotes truth, purity and defencelessness, as well as a state of *apatheia*, but on the other, symbolises sexual perversity and excessive self-humiliation. Undeniably, semi-naked Brener “sparring” with Yeltsin resembles St Basil Fool for Christ who rebuked Tsar Ivan the Terrible for numerous bloodbaths. The unclothed performer functions as a social denunciator and pariah, plays a critical role and “revolts against the art establishment, protests against the wider commercialisation of art and the dwindling role of the intellectual as a consequence of the economic liberalisation brought about by perestroika” (Piccolo 2011: 381-382).

One should not overlook the importance of the setting. Places of performances were given in parentheses earlier in this chapter in order to provide the reader with an overview. Clearly, the *aktsionisty* make active use of public places. Their approach is obviously pragmatic, as the events are immediately brought into the limelight. Still, the use of such public, almost sacred, places such as the Red Square, and gallery spaces such as Tretyakov and the Pushkin Museum, are also an attempt to de-sacralise historically and socially acknowledged areas. It is important to acknowledge the underlying tendency in these performances; they take place in central spaces to provide a spur for the audience’s reaction. It is noteworthy that the dichotomy of central vs peripheral proves to be generative also in this context. Here, we also mark a circular semantic shift: periphery – centre – periphery. Since the activist, as a counterpoint to the mainstream society, occupies an outside position, it enables him/her to attain a powerful critical function. By committing an artistic act, s/he leaves the periphery and moves into the centre, only to step back shortly afterwards so as to let the audience (initially regarded as peripheral and passive) become central to the action instead.

While discussing the connection between the central and the peripheral, it is interesting to look at the position of the author. Scintillating as it is, holy foolery in postmodern context is applied to both the artwork and the artist him-/herself, which may lead to a conclusion that the

boundary between the creator and his/her artistic creation becomes blurred. In other words, we may assume that, in certain contexts, the author still occupies a central position in the creative process (contrary to Barthes' postulate of "The Death of the Author"). Consequently, we may argue that in case of many postmodern artists we are dealing with a total art of living (*zhiznetvorchestvo*). As I will show later in this chapter, such is the case with Petr Pavlenskii's artistic activity.

If the artistic productions of the above-mentioned artists are clearly a stylization of *iurodstvo*, the creations by the Blue Noses and Voina ("War") groups are just as clearly a parody of this notion. As Moscow Actionism was fading away, it started to make inroads into other Russian cities. A Ekaterinburg-based artistic duo of Aleksander Shaburov and Viacheslav Mizin founded *The Blue Noses* group in 1999. They are famous for provocative works such as performances, videos and photographs that reproach the Russian status quo. To all intents and purposes of the present thesis, the series *The New Holy Fools, or the Pathology of Performance* (1999) is of essence.⁴⁵ It includes a collection of photographs, stylised as holy fools' icons, depicting semi-naked artists that appear in the middle of winter against the backdrop of Moscow's famous churches (e.g., St Basil's Cathedral). The pictures are clearly comically motivated. By deconstructing the holy foolish behavioural paradigm, of which many a postmodern artist availed themselves, the Blue Noses showed the "bankruptcy of the paradigm of holy foolishness" (Bauman 2002: 130). Consequently, we may conclude that the group rejected *iurodstvo* as a generative artistic method in contemporary art.

Voina is a Russian street-art collective known for their provocative and politically charged works of performance art. Voina's activities have ranged from street protest, symbolic pranks in public places and performance-art happenings, to vandalism and destruction of public property. More than a dozen criminal cases have been brought against the group. On 7 April 2011, the group was awarded an "Innovation" prize, established by the Russian Ministry of Culture, in the "Work of Visual Art" category.

Artistic endeavors can sometimes be obnoxious. Suffice it to mention the following actions: 1) "Europe sucks", which was aimed at showing "the leaders of European countries sucking the dick of the Russian President. This action is an artistic image showing that the leaders of the European countries are afraid of Putin: they kneel down and suck his dick. 2) "How to snatch a chicken" was a public symbolic immersion of a dead chicken into a vagina,

⁴⁵ For the photographs cf.: <http://e-gallery.guelman.ru/eng/authors/bluenoses/> (accessed 10 October 2015).

under the slogan “Bezbyadno!” (i.e. “Without whoring!”).⁴⁶ “In ancient Russia the word “whore” meant “lie” and “deception”. Nowadays in Russia there are millions of “whores” of both sexes, who lost their moral and ethical principles, who deceive and kill each other. Voina will symbolically fuck Russian cop-whores and their Kremlin prostitutes!” proclaimed the group. The action was held under the mottos “Let’s hit at pornography and fascism with Chicken Ryaba!” and “Fuck for the heir – Medvedev’s little bear!” The action took place two days before the election of the President Dmitry Medvedev, on February 29, 2008, on the ticket from the United Russia party, whose mascot is a bear. Voina staged a live public orgy at the State Museum of Biology in the hall “Metabolism, energy, nutrition, digestion”. “By this action the group portrayed pre-electoral Russia in the language of conceptual actionism: in Russia everyone fucks each other and the little president looks at it with delight. Voina mocked the farcical and pornographic elections in the country, as D. Medvedev just inherited V. Putin’s “presidential throne”.⁴⁷

Voina’s productions are indicative of the conceptual change within the very notion of the *iurodstvo* paradigm. First and foremost, the secular designation of the term holy foolishness, devoid of its initial religious significance, attains a radical and aggressive meaning – nudity becomes pornography, social criticism evolves into uproar. In the absence of higher values, the only thing an artist can do is to reach for his own body to express himself “through his own – at times even physical – suffering, (...) his own blood, in short through his own presence which goes beyond words” (Miziano 2008: 9-13).

Before recapitulating the main points of the present section, I would like to explicate its methodology. This chapter is based on the premise that divine foolery, in its transformed, secularised form, has become a structural feature of Russian postmodernism. In effect, contemporary artistic creations can be fathomed through an “apophatic analysis”, by virtue of the fact that postmodernism “embraces the pole of negativity” (Epstein 1999: 368), which is characteristic of the *iurodivye*. One may easily challenge this claim by asserting that an investigation of atheistic, or at best agnostic, culture in terms of faith is methodologically erroneous. Still, the inescapable fact about postmodernism is that in it the religious component is present “in a number of oblique, hidden or partially hidden ways” (Sutton 2006: 118). Epstein (1999: 355) goes as far as to assert that “the atheistic society literary seethes with religious allusions, symbols, references, substitutions and transformations”. He writes as follows:

⁴⁶ Found on the official webpage of the Voina Group: <http://plucer.livejournal.com/266853.html> (accessed 3 March 2014).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The very concept of spirituality seems strange and dated in the postmodern age, requiring theoretical revitalisation. By de-emphasising the category of ‘spirituality’, postmodern theory demonstrates its own limitations and points to the need for a new, broader paradigm of thought. The Russian post-atheist experience is valuable not only because it can be related to certain postmodern theological speculations that undermine the representability of God, but also because it leads beyond the conceptual framework of postmodernism by restoring the meaning of such an ‘obsolete’ category as spirituality (Epstein 1999: 387).

Epstein affirms that contemporary works of art echo “the religious unconscious”.⁴⁸ Artistic creation realises the conscious vision of the artist, and simultaneously stimulates the realm of the unconscious without rationalising it. Therefore, apophatism can be a viable analytical tool, as it escapes the dichotomy of conscious and unconscious, aiming at “a creative synthesis” (Epstein 1994).⁴⁹ The apophatic meditation, as Epstein (1994: 354) puts it, is “a technique of ‘psychosynthesis’, by which the conscious and the unconscious are integrated into the ‘superconscious’”.⁵⁰ Epstein considers art and literature to be the realms where “the religious unconscious can and does find expression” (Epstein 1999: 355-356). This assertion is culturally telling, and brings us to the notion of “minimal religion”. Epstein defines it as “an internal impulse, a state of spirit or a disposition of mind” (1999: 381). It is an “indigent” religion which is deprived of possessions, buildings, rituals and doctrines, but sustains an immediate God who is *hic et nunc* (Epstein 1999: 164-165). According to Epstein, a heavy reliance on the low cultural register guarantees authenticity. Just as faith encompasses non-faith, art implies its own destruction. This is how art and religion “become parts of a discussion at the outer limits of their meaning, encompassing both atheism and anti-art” (Epstein 1999: 372). Art is challenged by the unrepresentable, and so inspires the audience to “read between the lines, between the lives” (Durrell 1968: 763).

Epstein’s elaboration, debatable as it may be, enriches our understanding of Russian late- and post-Soviet culture, and justifies the use of the holy foolish behavioural paradigm in the cultural analysis of the contemporary art scene. In order to counterbalance Epstein’s assumptions, let us turn to Jonson’s analysis of contemporary protest art in Russia. In her study,

⁴⁸ According to him, in the Soviet period spirituality was repressed and relegated to the realm of subconscious, whereas “the primordial aggressiveness of the Id” was channelled into conscious class struggle. Interestingly, Epstein connects Soviet mass atheism with the long-standing tradition of apophatism. Since it is not possible to perceive or describe God in logical terms, it may as well mean that He does not exist. Nevertheless, the Russian artistic creations reveal religious motifs, which can be read as a transposition of unconscious elements to a conscious production (Epstein 1994: 4-30).

⁴⁹ http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/book_faith_image.html (accessed 25 August 2015).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Jonson (2015: 3), following Rancière (2004: 12), introduces the notion of the distribution of the sensible, which denotes “configurations of the sensory landscape, of what is seen and unseen, audible and inaudible, how certain objects and phenomena are related and also who can appear as a subject at certain time and places (Tanke 2011: 2). The distribution of the sensible is shared by a given society, and makes a framework of rules that govern this society. Within this framework one can find a collection of codes that are possible and/or acceptable to appear within a certain culture. This is called consensus. Rancière (2010: 69) also introduces a contradictory term – dissensus, which is “a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given”. Dissensus in art can be expressed by aesthetic rupture, understood as a “process of dissociation” (Rancière 2010: 143 (in:) Jonson 2015: 7). It can be reached by means of strategy of ambiguity, intervention or over-identification (Jonson 2015: 7). Structurally speaking, aesthetic rupture comes into being by insertion of an element of dissociation in the consensus ambit, and therefore allowing for new perspectives to appear. Interestingly, Rancière’s theory bears a striking resemblance to Bakhtin’s analysis of medieval culture; the realm of consensus corresponds to Bakhtinian official culture, dissensus to non-culture, while aesthetic rupture is tantamount to carnival.

When characterising the notion of protest, we can draw on Johnston’s definition of the three rudimentary categories of cultural factors, which include artefacts, ideations and performances. Johnston maintains that artefacts are “cultural objects produced either individually or collectively, such as music, art and literature”; ideations are “values, beliefs, mentalities, social representations, habitus, ideologies, and more specific norms of behaviour”, while performances are “actions that are symbolic because they are interpreted by those also present in the action, the audience” (2009: 7).

Jonson (2015: 9-10) introduces an interesting categorisation of protest art pieces according to their closeness to the authoritative discourse. She distinguishes “another gaze” (a light degree of dissensus), “dissent art” (a demonstrable discord between the artist and the prevailing discourse) and “art of engagement” (an artistic utterance purposefully entering the public realm to convey a political message). The above-mentioned analyses by Epstein and Jonson will provide a more nuanced understanding of Petr Pavlenskii’s artworks.

My intention was to outline and examine selected artistic movements to depict their affinity with the behavioural paradigm of holy foolery. Since the non-conformist artistic scene in late- and post-Soviet Russia is a multi-layered and complex phenomenon, I availed myself of the historical context, as well as terminology, that scholars offer on this subject. This section

makes no claim of giving a composite picture of alternative movements. It is rather meant to develop a general understanding of the socio-political situation in those times.

First and foremost, both notions are realised on the political, aesthetic and ontological levels. The realm of politics is probably the most noticeable. The artist, just as the *iurodivyi*, forms a counterpoint to the mainstream society. The physical and psychological “estrangement” has a twofold meaning: disengagement expresses an attitude opposing the authoritative discourse, but also enables an outside perspective on the system. The peripheral dimension plays a vital role in both phenomena, as it symbolises purification, transition (cf. chapter 1 of the present thesis), as well as inner freedom. The role of the artist and the holy fool was that of social denounciators, cherished and detested at the same time.

Secondly, contemporary (late and post-Soviet avant-garde) art and *iurodstvo* share a common aesthetic ground. The denial of categories such as transparency, beauty and comprehension can be interpreted as a pursuit of authenticity. Bakhtin (1984: 231) calls divine foolery an aestheticism in reverse. The reversal perspective is also applicable in the context of postmodernism. Another important aesthetic feature of contemporary (late and post-Soviet avant-garde) artistic creations is their unpredictability. Widely known techniques, conditions, texts and rituals are used in such a way as to produce an unanticipated cultural effect. The avant-garde artist and the holy fool employ similar devices, such as individualism, duality, provocation, kenosis and ambiguity. Furthermore, they both represent the sphere of disintegration, chaos and entropy with which an artist/*iurodivyi* enters a dialogue (Lipovetskii 1997: 176). In effect, “the postmodern fool” becomes the nexus of the sacred and the secular.

Finally, one can conclude that the implementation of *iurodstvo* is demonstrable in the postmodern art. If in the late-Soviet period the artistic endeavours were not so obviously connected with holy foolery, even though they revealed some key elements of this tradition, in present-day culture we observe direct allusions to the behavioural paradigm of divine foolery, which generate new meanings and deepen our understanding of the Russian artistic realm.

2.3. Nails, Knives and Wires – Political Art by Petr Pavlenskii

2.3.1. Theoretical Assumptions and Adopted Methods

The research question for the present thesis is to testify whether the behavioural paradigm of holy foolery is applicable to Russian contemporary art. To check the plausibility of this assumption, I have investigated works of political art by Petr Pavlenskii as a case study. In order to understand the research problem from a variety of perspectives, I have adopted two types of qualitative methods, i.e. in-depth interview and mass-media. I have conducted two

interviews with the artist in St Petersburg. The first session took place in a café on 21 April 2015, while the second one was carried out a day after, i.e. 22 April 2015, at the Norwegian University Centre. The data generated during the two sessions have been recorded. I was given an oral consent that all the interview material could be incorporated in the present work. Additionally, Petr Pavlenskii gave me some documents from his archive, which I was allowed to use in the present thesis. Since the conversation was held in Russian, I have afterwards translated Pavlenskii's utterances into English. The interview helped to identify intangible factors which shed new light on the present research. As for mass-media sources, I relied on interviews available on the internet. In such cases, both the web page address and the date of its access are given in the footnotes.

The chapter has a topic-based structure, and its thrust is the presentation and a semiotic analysis of Petr Pavlenskii's artistic utterances, as well as his lifestyle, which enable a recognition of the holy foolish behavioural paradigm in them. The section is organised along three parameters: that of the setting, the artistic process and the resonance in the media, which are going to be analysed by means of the triad of binary oppositions (centre – periphery, horizontal – vertical, absence – presence) that I will use as my prime analytical instrument in this chapter. The reason for adopting such interpretative device is twofold; firstly, the above-mentioned categories are widely used in semiotic studies, and secondly, the formulation of the triad is the outcome of my close reading of Wodzinski's monograph and Turner's theory of liminality. The categories overlap and interweave with each other, forming an intricate system of mutual dependencies.

2.3.2. Petr Pavlenskii – a General Introduction

Petr Pavlenskii is a Russian conceptual artist and political activist, best known for nailing his scrotum to the cobbles of the Red Square. He was born in Leningrad in 1984. Pavlenskii studied at St Petersburg Art and Industry Academy, department of monumental art, and at St Petersburg Pro Arte Foundation for Culture and Arts, none of which he completed. He gained public attention thanks to his action *Seam* (23 July 2012), which was performed in the aftermath of the infamous Pussy Riot trial. The artist stood with his mouth sewn, holding a poster with the slogan “Action of Pussy Riot was a replica of the famous action of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:12–13)”.⁵¹ After this action Pavlenskii was detained and made to undergo a psychological

⁵¹ ¹²Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.¹³ “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

examination. Subsequent actions included wrapping himself in a coil of barbed wire next to the main entrance of the Legislative Assembly of St Petersburg (*Carcass* 3 May 2013), pinning his own genitals to the Red Square on a Police Day (*Fixation* 10 November 2013), burning tires and setting up barricades on the Malo-Koniushennyi bridge in support of Kyiv's Maidan (*Liberty* 23 February 2014), and slicing off his earlobe while sitting atop a fence of the Serbskii institute of forensic psychiatry in Moscow (*Separation* 19 October 2014). He is a co-founder of Political Propaganda, a periodical devoted to political art, gender issues and cultural chauvinism.⁵² He lives and operates in St Petersburg.

2.3.3. The Creative Process

The main thrust of this section is to make an inquiry into the nature of artistic creation, artistic techniques and audience appreciation of Petr Pavlenskii's utterances. The analysis includes notions of deconstruction, provocation, body, precedent and metaphor, which are to be investigated against the backdrop of the binary oppositions introduced earlier in this chapter.

2.3.3.1. Lifestyle + Art = Homeostasis

At a cursory glance, Petr Pavlenskii draws much inspiration from a long-standing tradition of protest art, especially that of Moscow activism of the 1990s. Still, his artistic utterances exceed this notion. His art is sophisticated, well-conceptualised and deeply anchored in other artistic traditions, including folklore. Furthermore, in the case of Pavlenskii, we can speak about a "total art of living" (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), as his art is indissolubly linked with his lifestyle. In other words, paradigmatic shifts of categories (especially central vs. peripheral) are noticeable in his activity on various levels, both artistic and existential.

As has been mentioned before, Pavlenskii studied in two art institutions. One he describes as a "disciplinary institution that aims to make servants out of artists"⁵³, the other as an "institution that prepares artists-clerks trained in grant application".⁵⁴ Pavlenskii highlights that he is proud of not having received his diploma from either of these educational institutions, as it would have meant that he had adjusted himself to the system, which he has not.

I've studied at a number of places, from art schools to university, but I always leave before the end of the course. Why? Because I only need the information they have to

⁵² <http://artchronika.ru/news/19706/> (accessed 27 September 2015).

⁵³ Shaun Walker. 5 February 2014. "Petr Pavlensky: why I nailed my scrotum to Red Square", *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square> (accessed 16 September 2015).

⁵⁴ Author's interview in St Petersburg, 21 April 2015.

offer. I have no need for any degree or diploma. What's a degree? It's just a confirmation that you conformed to their standards entirely. Why would I want to do that?⁵⁵

Clearly, it is possible to detect here a gradual shift from the centre to the periphery. This underlying pattern proves to be in consonant with Turner's theory of liminality (see chapter 1, p. 15), which includes a "tripartite processual structure"; separation, margin (*limen*) and re-aggregation. By the same token, Pavlensky disengages himself from the official education system, lives out of the social ambit on a daily basis and re-unites himself with society by means of his actions. Investigated from this angle, Pavlenskii's attitude metaphorically alludes to that of *iurodivye*. The statement by Pavlenskii that I just quoted is very significant for at least two reasons. First, it clarifies Pavlenskii's attitude towards institutional art, and secondly, it makes an indirect reference to the aesthetics of his works. I will discuss the latter point in my subsequent presentation of deconstruction as an artistic technique.

As for non-institutional art, Pavlenskii considers it the only accessible form of expression that retains the artist's authenticity. More often than not, official art uses filters that neutralise the message of a work of art, and is entangled with the official apparatus of dependences (curators, administrators, directors, managerial staff, politicians). He concludes:

Therefore, 99% of everything that is demonstrated as part of the institutional art is a banal result of mutually beneficial concessions and agreements. In this case the authorities obtain results of their governance, managerial staff is satisfied, audience is taken for a fool as usual, and the artist becomes a betrayer; a betrayer of himself, his art and the people who he addresses.⁵⁶

As a result, Pavlenskii places himself in the remaining 1% of cultural production. The deliberate peripheral stance that the artist adopts is very telling. Quite paradoxically, his withdrawal does not prevent him from being a high-profile artist. Privately, just like representatives of opposition during the late Soviet period, Pavlenskii has given up his socio-political life; he does not have any property or a regular job, so that nothing can be taken away from him.

In his protest against the "lightness of being", Pavlenskii reminds us of the lifestyle of the *iurodivye*. Panchenko (2011: 101) points out that "the very manner in which holy fools subsist, that is, their homelessness and nakedness, serves as a reproach to the world of material

⁵⁵ Marc Bennetts, 1 December 2014. "Acts of resistance: Pyotr Pavlensky on performance art as protest", *The Calvert Journal*. <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensky-performance-art-protest> (accessed 16 September 2015).

⁵⁶ Jorge Lorenzo Santana. 13 July 2014. "Performing Against (Russian) Totalitarianism: An Interview with Petr Pavlensky". *Matter of Malaise*. <http://matterofmalaise.blogspot.no/2014/07/performing-against-russian.html> (accessed 16 September 2015).

wealth, carnality and spiritual vacuity". Surprising as it may seem, this quotation depicts Pavlenskii's way of living. Although he has not rejected money like other groups (e.g. Voina), and makes his living by giving lectures on art and political activism, Pavlenskii questions its significance in life. He says:

I do not refute money as such, since I know it can be used as a tool. Still, I am not going to make any compromise to get it. Materials from my actions are part of the information field which I work with. I will never sell them, as they are not goods. There are not any constraints on their usage. And this is important. (...) If I do not have any money, I find ways to live without it.⁵⁷

Pavlenskii in principle rejects property, especially the one of "bodyness" (*telesnost'*). Since the notion of body, understood both metaphorically and methodologically, is fundamental in Pavlenskii's works, it will be given a special consideration later in this chapter. Importantly, the artist questions the "institute of family and marriage" calling it an instrument of governance (*instrument pravleniia*). He lives in a squat with his daughters and a partner and some other people. He says:

The institute of property is my main concern, when a person announces another person his/ her own property. (...) When we take a person out of the system [into our circle?], the precedent is expanding. There appear other people who have had a relationship with him/her; they start to take offence, become upset or try to threaten me. Many interesting things happen then. I receive threatening letters: 'What did you do with my woman? I will take a revenge on you'. But how possibly can one take a revenge on me? I do not understand. By saying "my woman" he objectivises her. As if she was a sheep which had been stolen from a herd. That implies that I am a thief who has stolen a thing. Nothing of that sort!⁵⁸

Personal details may seem extraneous to the thrust of the present thesis. Nevertheless, the information about the private life of the artist, revealed by Pavlenskii himself during the interview, broadens the perspective of the research. As it turns out, the paradigmatic shift from the central to the peripheral is realised simultaneously on a personal and an artistic level. Thus, the separation attains both a symbolic and a practical significance. Not only does the subversive nature of in-betweenness help Pavlenskii to recognise hidden contradictions and decry the postures of the dominant ideology, it also releases him from imposed social conventions. We can draw a semiotic parallel between the artist and the holy foolish paradigm. This liminal journey of his is almost tantamount to the holy foolish renunciation of commonly accepted

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 22 April 2015.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

values with a simultaneous retreat into seclusion. Panchenko (2011: 101) maintains that “the very manner in which holy fools subsist, that is, their homelessness and nakedness, serves as a reproach to the world of material wealth, carnality, and spiritual vacuity”. The *iurodivyi* returns equanimous to the fuss and tumult of the world only to embark on an ‘errand of mercy’. His/her conduct is counter-cultural from both the layman’s and the monk’s standpoint. We observe the same pattern in Pavlenskii’s lifestyle. The artist distances himself from the commercialised, ready-to-use world in pursuit of his own system of values.

Acceptance of some form is considered a duty by many. And people for some reason believe it is true. Everything is done for you; the only thing you should do is to bend (*smiat’sia*) and fit in the system. By no means should you do that. Your task is to question everything and create your own system of values that you consider important.

This assertion adequately illustrates the concept of dissensus. Pavlenskii quite rightly assumes that a human being from cradle to grave is supposed to fulfil tasks imposed by the society. Consequently, we realise some general plan, and in this way our life becomes calculated and predictable: the 9 to 5 routine, debt-based economic systems, social duties. This is how we learn to depend on the official system, and with time we become so dependent on it that we cannot live without it. To paraphrase, Pavlenskii maintains that the intricate web of social structures, viewed by authorities as a protective measure, is actually meant as a disciplinary institution to control the people. They are taught that they cannot overcome it and exits outside the system. The artist calls it a syndrome of learnt helplessness (*sindrom vyuchennoi bespomoshchnosti*). Pavlenskii crusades against the authoritative apparatus of abuse, so as not to be crushed by it.⁵⁹ He tries to testify the boundaries imposed by the authorities to demonstrate that the official consensus is not a monolithic structure, and therefore subject to change.

Pavlenskii also represents an avant-gardist conception of a total art of living (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), which is defined as a life-creation process, based on subjectively defined values and meaning of one’s life, developed in accordance with socially significant values.⁶⁰

Pavlenskii strives for authenticity. He stresses that it would be unjust to perform an artistic act and ask people to take it seriously, and simultaneously live against the message of

⁵⁹ Marina Galperina. 13 November 2013. “An Interview with Petr Pavlensky: Anarchist Artist Nailed His Balls to the Red Square, So You Don’t Have To”, *Animal New York*, <http://animalnewyork.com/2013/interview-petr-pavlensky-anarchist-artist-nailed-balls-red-square-dont/> (accessed 17 September 2015).

⁶⁰ Жизнь как творчество - это создание человеком своей жизни на основе выработанных им ценностей и смысла своего существования в соответствии с общественнозначимыми ценностями. Source: http://thematic_philosophical.academic.ru/108/ЖИЗНЕТВОРЧЕСТВО (accessed 17 September 2015).

his actions. In other words, we may conclude that his lifestyle and art form a concomitant structure.

2.3.3.2. Picking up the Pieces

If the previous section was a study of interconnection between Pavlenskii's lifestyle and art, then this part will analyse his works *sub specie semioticae*. It is not viable, though, to investigate his art outside a socio-political context. Therefore, Jonson's considerations of protest in art are going to be generative.

Within the theoretical framework of his actions, Pavlenskii has embraced a number of techniques quite often associated with postmodernism, i.e. deconstruction, decontextualisation and fragmentation. The artist's intention is to tear down the decoration made by public institutions, to convey his socially significant message. In other words, the artist endeavours to detect hidden patterns of violence in the authoritative discourse and reveal them by means of his actions. Pavlenskii's art is well-conceptualised and has solid theoretical background. His ideas for his actions fuse together gradually "compiled fragments" implemented in a new context.⁶¹ This statement bears a striking resemblance to Lipovetskii's reinterpretation of *iurodstvo* in the postmodern context; "the holy fool, like the postmodern writer, enters into the dialogue with chaos in his attempt to find truth amidst filth and obscenity" (1997: 176). By the same token, Pavlenskii picks up the pieces of fragmented reality and transfers them into another target domain. In this way, Pavlenskii builds up his visual metaphors, which the artist himself defines as a translation of political events into visual codes.⁶² He asserts:

I do not consider myself a mouthpiece of the truth, but I think I sometimes successfully formulate the situation in which people exist. I encounter something [...] the time passes [...] I read about something, and at some point I gather enough fragments that define the situation. Now is the time for formulation. The situation I am trying to present [in a concentrated form] is diffused (*rasseiana*). It affects one person in this way, another in that way. It has different forms, but there is something general about it.⁶³

To paraphrase, Pavlenskii gathers material over longer periods of time. He premises his art on an assumption that "hidden codes of power" are a shared reality, which applies to everyone,

⁶¹ <http://animalnewyork.com/2013/interview-petr-pavlensky-anarchist-artist-nailed-balls-red-square-dont/> (accessed 23 September 2015).

⁶² Tatjana Vukic. 10 December 2013. "Nudity as Activism – Interview with Petr Pavlensky, Red Square Artist", *Osocio*, <http://osocio.org/message/nudity-as-activism-interview-with-petr-pavlensky-red-square-artist/> (accessed 23 September 2015)

⁶³ Author's interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 21 April 2015.

albeit in a different way and to a different degree.⁶⁴ By meticulous observation, he collects pieces of information that are indicative of this process. The final stage is the message formulation and generalising it, so that everyone, or at least the majority, could recognise themselves in the action.

Given that culture *per se* is a collection of codes, he employs various symbols to create a new meaning. Importantly, the signifier (a gesture) is taken from a peripheral sphere (e.g. the meta-language of the incarcerated) and implemented in another unforeseeable, yet central context. At this point we can offer a complementary analysis using Jonson's terms. Pavlenskii's art is a fusion of artefacts and ideations that are visualised in a performance. Interestingly, both ways of reasoning lead us to a similar conclusion; fragmented culture-specific codes are composed in a way to form an iconic message. Additionally, we can argue that Pavlenskii's artworks have an inductive reasoning behind them, i.e. specific premises lead the artist to general conclusions.

Pavlenskii's works form a hermeneutic circle; neither the action nor its individual parts can be comprehended without a reference to each other. An artistic declaration, a particular visual code and a setting form a unity. Still, a displacement of the symbolic order is central to his aesthetics.

Let us come back for a while to the quotation given above. There is one particularly interesting component that might be easily overlooked, namely simultaneousness and synchronicity. If the former is read as a confluence of circumstances that affect everyone, albeit to a different degree, then the latter is to be understood as "meaningful coincidences that occur with no causal relationship, yet seem to be meaningfully related" (Tarnas 2006: 50). The notion of coincidental analogies becomes important if we acknowledge the fact that after *Fixation* a criminal procedure was instituted. Just to remind ourselves, this action was meant as a metaphor of a police state into which Russia turns. The document was signed by an investigator (cf. figure 1 and attachment 4).

⁶⁴ The term "hidden code of powers" is taken from: Brooks Platt, Jonathan. 13 November 2014. "The body politic: how Pyotr Pavlensky's performance art is breaking the mould", *The Calvert Journal*. <http://calvertjournal.com/comment/show/3365/pyotr-pavlensky-protest-art-living-pain-sculpture> (accessed 20 August 2015).

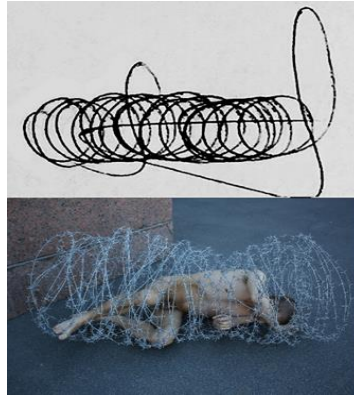


Figure 1. Coincidental analogy. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii

Before the stunt on the Red Square, Pavlenskii carried out *Carcass* which aimed at the repressive legislative system in Russia. A roll of barbed wire in which he lay bears a striking resemblance to the investigator's signature, which metaphorically can be interpreted as a symbol of the law. By way of analogy we can conclude that the signature is, to a certain extent, a visual response to Pavlenskii's visual protest. Consequently, the signature doubles as an "epilogue" of the discussion spurred by the artist, and a corroboration of Pavlenskii's argument.

Another example of category's slippage (peripheral – central) is the fact that the idea for *Fixation* struck Pavlenskii when he was detained after *Carcass*. It was in prison that the artist learnt that Soviet prisoners would nail their scrotums to trees to protest against inhuman conditions. Pavlenskii admits:

I did not think much of it at first but then, when I began thinking that the whole country is becoming a prison system, that Russia is turning into a big prison and a police state, it seemed perfect.⁶⁵

The act of employing a symbol in a context that is unexpected and unintended for it, is central to the aesthetics of Pavlenskii.

Let us sum up one of the initial stages of the creative process in Pavlenskii's art. Pavlenskii's main artistic strategy is observation. The artist searches for specific examples of the state's oppression of its people, and then seeks to present them in a gesture accessible to a viewer. Figuratively speaking, we may compare this process to putting together pieces of a puzzle. The idea of a fragmented reality is close to postmodern aesthetics, as well as to *iurodstvo*. The act of creating new meanings out of unanticipated elements is significant for my approach in the present chapter, as we can detect a category slippage (peripheral – central and

⁶⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square> (accessed 29 September 2015).

absent – present) already at the formative stage of Pavlenskii’s utterances. The methodology seems to be corroborated by the theory of protest in art (cf. Jonson 2015) that highlights the use of artefacts and ideations that belong to the realm of official culture in the ambit of dissenting works of art.

2.3.3.3. The Setting

Let us first unpick the semiotic importance of the setting of Pavlenskii’s actions. Borrowed from literary criticism, the term is understood as a combination of place, historical context and time, as well as social milieu. These components form not only a telling backdrop to Pavlenskii’s actions, but also allow for a broad interpretation of the aesthetics of his works.

All his actions took place in historically and socially significant spaces, the choice of which is strictly connected with the message Pavlenskii wanted to convey. *Seam* occurred at the Kazan Cathedral (St Petersburg) and was meant as support of the Pussy Riot group who faced criminal charges after staging their “punk prayer” in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Interestingly, this action is called “Shov” (шов, *shov*) in Russian, while it has been rendered into English as “Seam” or “Stitch”. If the former name focuses our attention on the act of performance (or, quite ironically, on the fact that authorities bring three young women to a show trial for quite an innocuous stunt), then the latter seems to narrow down the interpretative spectrum to the literal meaning.

The artist makes use of two important semantic fields, i.e. the biblical and the historical. He refers directly to the Cleansing of the Temple narrative, in which Jesus expels money changers and livestock from Herod’s Temple. This, in turn, can be read as a comment on the Russian status quo and the state-church alliance. With its empire-style architecture and rich interior, Kazan Cathedral (which is a mother cathedral of the St Petersburg metropolis) can be treated as a byword for institutionalised religion that serves as a tool in the hands of authorities. Still, the devil is in the detail, as the old adage goes. Pavlenskii’s art is highly conceptualised and packed with numerous cultural allusions. Interestingly, the first political protest by industrial workers in Russia, the so-called Kazan demonstration (1876), took place in front of this church. Historical context, as we will see in due course, plays a significant role in Pavlenskii’s actions.⁶⁶ The Kazan Cathedral fuses historical, biblical and political contexts simultaneously.

⁶⁶ Pavlenskii defines himself as a political actionist and an artist. He makes a clear distinction between a performance and an action. Both are aimed at attracting as much public interest as possible but the former can be announced before staging, while the latter must not be disclosed until its accomplishment. Therefore, he refers to

The subsequent action, *Carcass*, was carried out by the main entrance of the Legislative Assembly in St Petersburg, where the infamous laws on censorship and propaganda of homosexuality were passed. Here, again, the utterance, through a visual code, is connected to a space. As the artist himself emphasises, the reaction of the paramedic staff and police officers exceeded his expectations. Having freed Pavlenskii from the barbed wire, they let him use the grand entrance (fig. 2), which is reserved only for momentous happenings or very important people.



Figure 2. Pavlenskii leaves the Legislative Assembly by the grand entrance. Courtesy of the artist.

On a daily basis, the office staff of the Assembly use the service entrance. Consequently, the artist, quite coincidentally, is brought to the limelight again, but this time by official bodies. The artistic utterance that was supposed to be neutralised by authorities as soon as possible, attracted even more attention, thanks to the same authorities. We observe a performative shift from the peripheral (end of the action) to the central (the artist, covered with a carpet, uses the main entrance). The chain of actions is prolonged by official bodies. The ability to entangle authorities in the action and produce the artwork with their assistance, so to speak, is another distinctive feature of Pavlenskii's art. I shall come back to it in the discussion of his creation process. It is noteworthy that the action was carried out on a Good Friday according to the Julian calendar. It is very tempting, therefore, to conclude that Pavlenskii tries to picture himself as a martyr for "our freedom and yours". Fitzpatrick (2013) goes as far as to claim that "Pavlenskii is likely to become a bona fide political prisoner soon, joining Putin's other martyrs

his artistic utterances as "actions". Although many sources use both terms interchangeably, in the present work only the term "action" will be used to designate Pavlenskii's art.

in the mute drama of victimhood that tends to equalise all political movements”.⁶⁷ The artist, however, denies such motivations. The “power of the powerless”, as Vaclav Havel called the dissident movement in Eastern Europe under Communism, is not what Pavlenskii aims at. Quite on the contrary, he strives for an art of a “direct action”. As the artist says, he was becoming increasingly exasperated by the “kitchen indifference” (*kukhonnaia indifferentnost’*) of the Russians, and the Pussy Riot trial was the final straw.⁶⁸ He explains:

Previously, it seemed that there were peaceful ways of dealing with this problem; that you could wait on a side (*na storonke*) until the game was over. But now it seems obvious to me that I, as an artist, must address the public.⁶⁹

It is interesting that Pavlenskii places himself on the periphery (“on a side”). Even if my analysis of this particular performance is that of a direct action, it seems important to elaborate on this issue to exclude the erroneous interpretation of Pavlenskii as Russia’s new martyr.

Let us come back now to the significance of the date of the action. Bearing in mind that Pavlenskii’s actions are well prepared and form a unity of time, place and message, it is hardly a coincidence that the artist chose precisely that day. We can conclude that both occurrences are of deep eschatological nature. Both include kenotic elements. Presumably, this action echoes Epstein’s theory of the religious unconscious. The artist connects himself to death and resurrection.

The ground is an essential component of the setting. Both *Carcass* and the subsequent action, *Fixation*, were carried out on the ground. The notion of ground (*pochva*), especially in opposition to stone, is of great significance to the Russian cultural realm. The act of lying/sitting naked on the ground becomes extremely interesting in the light of the philosopher Arzhanukhin’s interpretation of the Palace Square in St Petersburg. He says: “the Alexander column stands outside the Winter Palace. For me this square is a metaphor of our existence; a huge area has been covered with cobblestones, stones stand for people, while the column symbolises the authorities, and where is the society? There is no one”.⁷⁰ Pavlenskii’s act demonstrates the status of an ordinary person not only by getting himself wrapped in a barbed

⁶⁷ Catherine A. Fitzpatrick. 5 December 2013. “For Our Freedom and Yours”, *The Interpreter*. <http://www.interpretermag.com/for-our-freedom-and-yours/> (accessed 27 September 2015).

⁶⁸ Pavlenskii alludes to the Russian tradition of the Soviet period when people, critical of the system means dared to air their grievances only in their shared kitchens.

⁶⁹ Anna Matveeva. 24 July 2012. “Petr Pavlenskii: Prostoe peresechenie vertikali s gorizontali’iu uzhe mozhet rassmatrivat’sia kak oskorblekie very”, *Artxronika*, <http://artchronika.ru/persona/pavlensky-interview/> (accessed 28 September 2015).

⁷⁰ Jan Strzałka. 2000. “Obywatel poza Cerkwią”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/numer/274608/strzalka.html> (accessed 28 September 2015). Translation is mine.

wire, but also by means of his position. In this context, the horizontal line stands for the bottom line, the level of a helpless individual. In this respect, *Carcass* displays certain characteristics of the holy foolish behavioural paradigm. A downgraded artist, just as a *iurodivyi*, occupies the lowest position in society. Still, this does not prevent him from denouncing the tsar, or other authorities for that matter. The striking closeness of the monarch and the holy fool has its roots in the ancient tradition, and is interpreted as affinity between the first and the last link of the chain.

We should not overlook the semiotic importance of the entrance, which signifies the realm between two ambits. Holy fools would sit on the thresholds of churches. In this way they visualised their betwixt-and-between position that combined the sacred and the profane. By the same token, Pavlenskii's position designates the clash of the legislative (authoritative) and the social realms; the communication between them is thwarted by the barbed wire.

Probably the most famous of Pavlenskii's actions, *Fixation*, was performed on the Red Square.⁷¹ For hundreds of years, it has been a border zone between the sacred and the profane. Carnival festivals and trade intertwined with religious life here. St Basil's Cathedral, visualising the heavenly Jerusalem, stands next to the Place of Skulls. Importantly, the Red Square is where *iurodivye* operated. Russia's world famous landmark, St Basil Cathedral is named after Basil the Blessed, known for berating Ivan the Terrible for his atrocities. This odd mixture of mutually exclusive elements "represents Russia in microcosm" (Gulenkin 2015: 1-2).

The Soviet era attached a different meaning to the square as the place of the Lenin mausoleum and the Necropolis. It also became a symbol of "Soviet ideology and authority" (Gulenkin 2015: 2), and a place where victory parades took place.

After 1990, the Red Square was used for artistic purposes again. The early post-Soviet period is marked by strong artistic utterances, some of which took place on the square. Many a performance artist made an active use of the time-honoured tradition of holy foolery, by producing their provocative, bewildering and mesmerising performances, verging on the sacred and the profane.

Pavlenskii's action coincided with Police Day (10 November), and in this context it takes on a deeper meaning. By fixing himself to a cobblestone of Moscow's central square, he alludes artfully to Russian penal tradition. Acts of self-mutilation (including nailing testicles, sewing mouths shut, slashing oneself with a spoon, or carving manifestoes on one's body),

⁷¹ On the significance of the Red Square in Russian performative arts see: <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/4190/performance-art-in-red-square-pussy-riot-pyotr-pavlensky> (accessed 09 September 2015).

were, and still are, used by the incarcerated. It is commonly assumed that self-harm doubles as a gesture of boycott and a meta-language of prisoners.⁷²

As mentioned in the discussion of *Carcass*, the proximity to the ground plays an important role also in this action. Still, in this case it seems plausible to conclude that the horizontal line is a symbol of passivity, inability to stand up for one's rights. Such interpretation is corroborated by Pavlenskii's explanation:

The performance can be seen as a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of contemporary Russian society. As the government turns our country into one big prison, stealing from the people and using the money to grow and enrich the police apparatus and other repressive structures, society allowing this, and forgetting its numeral advantage, is bringing the triumph of the police state closer by its inaction (Pavlenskii 2013).⁷³

His critique of existing social conditions is expressed in the hub of Russia's political world. It is interesting to look at a comment made by a passer-by:

There this gesture is realised behind the fences, fences, fences... There is nothing that comes from within these fences, not even pictures, because nobody would take them. Everyone knows that this is taking place somewhere there, but somewhere behind a large number of doors. And here, it happens right in the centre. (Pavlenskii's archive)⁷⁴

Там этот жест осуществляется за этими заборами, заборами, заборами.... Из-за заборов просто сюда не доходит, даже фотографии не найти, потому что их не будут делать. Все знают, что это где-то там происходит, но где-то за огромным количеством дверей. А тут это происходит в самом центре.

The "centrality" of this action seems to be its strength. As Pavlenskii (2014) highlights, the Red Square is not only a byword for authoritarian government, but in practice this place virtually swarms with police officers. Done in the broad daylight, the action was a bold move that mesmerized and stupefied the official bodies.

⁷² In his two actions, *Seam* and *Fixation*, Pavlenskii re-interpreted acts of resistance used by Soviet labour camp prisoners. It turns out that self-mutilation was a characteristic feature of Soviet and later Russian penal system. Examples of self-injurious conduct include tattooing, slashing and carving slogans on one's body, as well as voluntary severing of lips.

⁷³ Ekow Eshun, Maryam Omid, Jamie Rann, Igor Zinatulin. 14 November 2013. "The naked truth: the art world reacts to Pyotr Pavlensky's Red Square protest", *The Calvert Journal*, <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/1768/pyotr-pavlensky-russian-artist-nails-red-square> (accessed 10 September 2015).

⁷⁴ Visual materials as well as extracts from legal and medical documentation was given to me by Petr Pavlenskii during the interview in St Petersburg on 22 April 2015. This fragment I received via email after the interview had taken place.

So far, I have been discussing the category of centrality from an aesthetic point of view. To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the subject, let us investigate it from a legal vantage point. Thanks to the artist, I got hold of police reports of his actions. Interestingly, for Pavlenskii the Red Square is a byword for an authoritarian government, while the official bodies perceive it as “the historical centre of the Russian Orthodox Church”. Consequently, his action was an “insult of religious feelings of believers”. The main accusation repeated in many reports is that the historical setting was used as a backdrop for such a notorious act:

It is widely known that Kremlin and other facilities in the Red Square area (Cathedral of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos on the Moat, known as St Basil’s Cathedral, the state historical museum and others), in the background of which Pavlenskii P. A. carried out his actions of an immoral nature, are widely acknowledged as Russia’s spiritual and state symbols.⁷⁵

In another document we read:

(...) such acts worsen the condition of given facilities, are harmful to the historical-cultural and environmental milieu, as well as violate the rights and legitimate interests of other individuals. As a result of Pavlenskii’s actions, the intellectual perception of historical monuments on the Red Square was affected, as it is obvious that many would associate them (the historical monuments) with the immoral actions of P. A. Pavlenskii. It is obvious that the right to visit and getting acquainted with historical and cultural objects was violated.⁷⁶

It was not so much the deed but the setting in which it was carried out that felt so unsuitable to the authorities. Pavlenskii’s gesture would probably not be so shocking for the public if it had not been for the place where it was performed. Conceivably, *Fixation* is “indebted” to the Red Square for its success. If this is true, one could argue that some public spheres are sacralised to such a degree that they do not tolerate acts of non-cultural provenance. It was precisely the clash between the monolithic, official style, on the one hand, and the alternative, anarchistic, on the other, that made *Fixation* such a powerful stunt. This argument seems to be corroborated by the fact that in the aftermath of a subsequent action, *Liberty*, Pavlenskii faced criminal charges of hooliganism. In this case too, the place of action was of critical importance.

In February 2013, Pavlenskii recreated Kyiv’s Maidan by burning tires and building mock barricades on Malo-Koniushennyi bridge at close quarters to the Church of the Saviour on Blood. The historical account is very telling in the context of this action, too. In this place,

⁷⁵ For the original cf. Attachment 5.

⁷⁶ For the original cf. Attachment 6.

Emperor Alexander II was fatally wounded by members of the Narodnaia Volia (People's Will), a left-wing organisation. In his manifesto, Pavlenskii explains:

Burning tires, Ukrainian flags, black flags and the rumble of strikes on the iron – that is the melody of liberation and revolution. Maidan is irrevocably expanding and entering the heart of the Empire. The fight with imperialistic chauvinism continues; the Church of the Saviour on Blood is where members of Narodnaia Volia assassinated the emperor, who dealt cruelly with liberation uprisings in the Right-Bank Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Belarus. We fight for our freedom and yours. That day when the authorities call on us to celebrate the Day of the Defender of Motherland, we ask all to celebrate Maidan and the Defence of Personal Freedom holiday. Bridges are burning, and there is no way back.⁷⁷

Горящие покрышки, флаги Украины, черные флаги и грохот ударов по железу - это песня освобождения и революции, - говорится в манифесте акции. - Майдан необратимо распространяется и проникает в сердце Империи. Борьба с имперским шовинизмом продолжается; храм Спаса-на-Крови - это место, где народовольцы совершили успешное покушение на императора, жестоко расправлявшегося с освободительными восстаниями в Правобережной Украине, Польше, Литве и Белоруссии. Мы боремся за вашу и нашу свободу. В этот день, когда государство призывает праздновать день защитника отечества, - мы призываем всех встать на праздник Майдана и защиту своей свободы. Мосты горят, и назад дороги уже нет.

“For the first time [the action is] about freedom and not prison”, Pavlenskii explains. But ironically, it is *Liberty* which has brought the artist to trial for vandalism. Significantly, the main reason for it was the setting. Let us have a look at an eye-witness's statement (for the original text see attachment 2):

Kurochkin explained that on 23 February 2014 he and his family arrived to the Church of the Saviour on Blood for the morning mass. They saw burning tires on Malo-Koniushennyi Bridge, there were some people standing next to it, who shouted something while waving with flags. He, Kurochkin, called the police and fire brigade immediately. When he came out of the church after the mass (approximately at 9.30), the fire was extinguished and employees of municipal services were removing burned tires from the bridge; he saw that the gilt on the bridge's decorative railings was damaged (or, most likely, smoked over) by combustion products. As a professional restorer he asserts that such damage demands a certain range of restorative measures either by polishing the gilt, or by reconstructing its layers. He was deeply outraged by the unknown, whose deeds he considers a manifestation of vandalism.

Pavlenskii gives an interesting account of Kurochkin's comment. For the artist, Kurochkin bears characteristics of the authoritative discourse in Russia in numerous respects. First and

⁷⁷ <http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/activism/m.225213.html> (accessed 10 September 2015).

foremost, he is an upstanding citizen, who goes to church with his family and has a respectable occupation of a restorer, and the idea of restoration of traditional values is placed high on the political agenda; tsarist autocracy (*samoderzhavie*), imperialistic ambitions and Bolshevik's ideals have fused into a golden-red hybrid.⁷⁸ Metaphorically speaking, “the smoked gilt” is the ultimate aim for Pavlenskii, who wants to destroy decorations put up by the authorities.

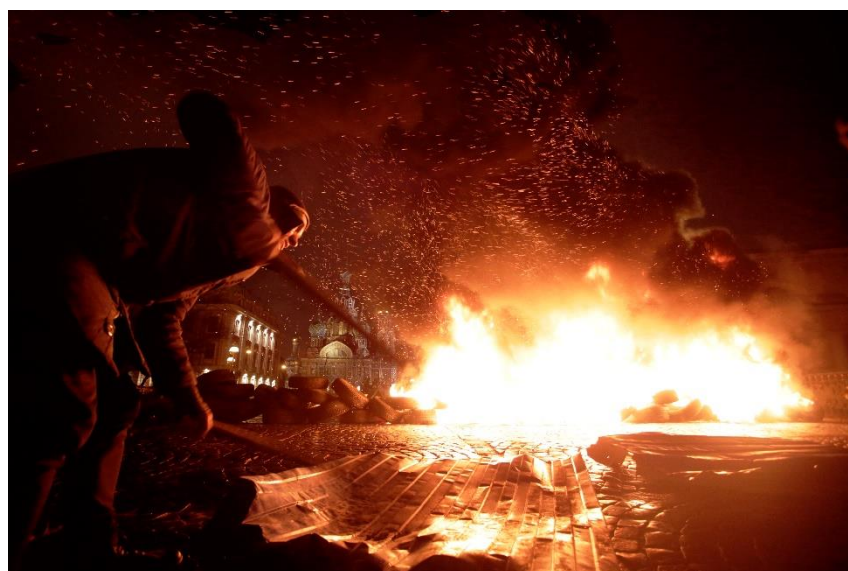


Figure 3. *Liberty*, St Petersburg 23 February 2014. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

Pavlenskii's hitherto last action, *Separation*, took place on the top of the fence the Serbskii Psychiatric Centre in Moscow. In Soviet times, many dissidents were sent there for “ideologically incorrect views”. The action served as a reproach of Russia's “growing use of psychiatry to silence dissidents” (Pavlenskii 2014).⁷⁹ The artist continues: “the return of punitive psychiatry testifies to the return of the Soviet regime. We are seeing a very strong revival”.⁸⁰ Interestingly, as the artist revealed during the author's interview with him on 22 April 2015, the action was also motivated by another reason.

After *Liberty*, Pavlenskii was called for a psychiatric evaluation, which he had already undergone several times in the wake of his first three actions. Since they all proved him sane, he refused to have it done for the fourth time. Finding himself under a great pressure from the

⁷⁸ Author's interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 22 April 2015.

⁷⁹ Dmitry Volchek. 28 October 2013. “Self-Mutilating Russian Artist Says ‘There's No Greater Evil Than Law-Abiding Citizens’”, *Radio Free Europe*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-pyotr-pavlensky-interview-protest-earlobe/26663128.html>, (accessed 02 September 2015).

⁸⁰ Pavlenskii alludes to two instances of locking up political dissidents. Mikhail Kosenko, who assaulted police during protests on the Bolotnaia Square, was sentenced to psychiatric treatment after he had been diagnosed as insane at the Serbskii centre. Recently, the Ukrainian pilot Nadiiezhda Savchenko, a war prisoner of sorts, was forced to undergo a psychiatric examination there, too.

authorities, Pavlenskii finally yielded to this demand, but in his own, provocative manner. Personally, the artist questions psychiatry, calling it a quasi-science, as it depends on a subjective interpretation of fragmentary data. He says, “like the knife separates the earlobe, this wall separates the society of ‘normal people’ from ‘crazy patients’. The question is – where is the wall, where is this threshold, who establishes it?” (Pavlenskii 2014).

Stripped naked, Pavlenskii sat on the fence of the Serbskii centre (not on the roof, as many sources say), sliced his right earlobe off, and waited for the reaction of the authorities. Seldom does the dichotomy of central and peripheral play such a crucial role as in this action. His spatial, but also metaphorical in-betweenness, his remaining on the verge of the sane and the insane worlds, mesmerised the official bodies. Pavlenskii recollects (2014):

Numerous officials gathered: psychiatrists, police officers, firemen and members of the Emergencies Ministry. They didn’t know how to act because I wasn’t doing anything, I wasn’t threatening them in any way, but they were scared. They were scared of a defenceless man without clothes, although they were all armed and had bullet-proof vests.

The state of in-betweenness, formerly expressed by lying at the entrance of the Legislative Assembly, was now conveyed by a symbolic meaning of a fence. Still, it was not just Pavlenskii who put himself in the zone of indistinction. By cutting off his earlobe, he addressed the question of sanity to the authorities, who found themselves in a difficult situation. They actually also found themselves betwixt-and-between the sane and the insane.

Interestingly, the action did not end with the removal of the artist from the wall. Quite on the contrary, it evolved and expanded into another, hitherto peripheral setting. Pavlenskii enters the mental hospital:

I was driven to a different hospital’s psychiatric ward. A terrifying place, decrepit. Dirty walls, peeling paint. There was a painting of a train. I got this sensation that it is all in a context of a day care centre. I asked the doctor ‘Why’? “Well, so they can remember childhood, of course! When you were happy and taken care of. It is calming”.⁸¹

He is both a patient and an observer. Here too, he penetrates “the oppressive system” and provokes it to criticise itself. Pavlenskii learns “the code of conduct” at the Serbskii Centre:

Half of the people there are drooling. I later found out that’s called “passive” (“non-violent”). The “passive” ones are basically vegetables. Once you do anything other than

⁸¹ <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22278/1/earlobe-slicing-artist-petr-pavlensky-i-feel-excellent> (accessed 15 September 2015).

that, like start talking, asking questions or make any effort to assess your predicament, you are instantly labelled as “violent” (*buinyi*). I had a conflict with one of the staff for about twenty minutes and they restrained me to bed. I was given a proposition: if I just lied there and didn’t say anything, they offered to take off the restraints. That is how it works.⁸²

Pavlenskii sees the staff’s proposal as a metaphor of the Russian society in general; you are “free” to do/be anything as long as you are immobile and inert.

The artist takes an unprecedented step of proving himself sane at Russia’s main centre of psychiatry. As Galperina (2014: 6) notices, Pavlenskii makes an interesting circular move – he enters the system only to criticize it, and then, by recognising that the artist is sane, the system criticizes itself, which is in turn refuted by Pavlenskii.

In the final analysis in this subchapter I have investigated the importance of the setting in Pavlenskii’s art. On the basis of given examples one may conclude that the actions of Pavlenskii have a concomitant structure. The artist has a virtuoso ability to select a setting that visually encapsulates the content of his works. Consequently, the relationship between the action and its contexts is reciprocal. It is possible to distinguish between general and specific settings. The former is understood as a physical place of high cultural and historical significance, while the latter can be defined as political and social context. Only a combination of these two components forms a comprehensible unity.

The setting doubles as a “centring idea” and a background. In each action the physical space is tightly connected with the artist’s message (i.e. it is central for its understanding), but simultaneously it serves as a meaningful backdrop for the action. Thus, we can assume that the notion of setting has a central and a peripheral function.

Pavlenskii plays with Russia’s landmarks (the Red Square, the Kazan Cathedral) by adding a new meaning to their ritualised significance. This is where the physical setting meets the metaphorical one; he decontextualises a symbol characteristic of one setting (Maidan, prison, art history) and performs it in another, which leads to an unanticipated cultural production. In other words, the artist makes a performative reinterpretation and reproduction of contexts and settings, which provide a venue for discussing a socio-political reality.

As has been mentioned before, the binary opposition of horizontal and vertical proves to be generative in some contexts. By way of example, in *Carcass* and *Fixation*, actions aimed at denouncing the repressive legal system and social apathy, we observe the use of the

⁸² Ibid.

horizontal line, which may visualise the act of submission, defeat or, more likely, express criticism about the modern non-civil society.

Pavlenskii's art, just like *iurodstvo*, is an urban phenomenon. "Rising in the morning, the blessed once again set off at a rapid pace to move people to laughter amidst the dim of the city without food or rest the whole day", we read in vitae of St Andrew of Tsargrad.⁸³ The public space is the stage where they operate. The *iurodivyi*'s and Pavlenskii's actions appear as strong, and sometimes sensational plays, which are in opposition to the quotidian existence.

Pavlenskii's works can be fathomed by means of the binary opposition of absence – presence. The artist, who is not present in the official social ambit, appears in the public space to convey his message. He says:

Whenever I do a performance like this I never leave the place. It is important for me that I stay there. The authorities are in a dead-end situation and do not know what to do. They cannot ask the person to leave a square because he is nailed to the square. And they cannot do anything with a man inside a coil of barbed wire.

Having drawn the public attention, the artist retreats. He is neither absent nor present. The situation Pavlenskii orchestrates is deeply paradoxical, as this is partly an action without taking an action. This is where Pavlenskii's art meets holy foolery; a solitary protest in the name of human values in the hustle and bustle of a metropolis. Another parallel one might draw is that of theatricality. Evreinov states (1913: 28-31):

The work of art aims at aesthetic pleasure, whereas theatrical work prizes spontaneous transformation, which may or may not be of an aesthetic nature. It goes without saying that one's ability to portray, like any other human talent, can be viewed as art; however, it is a kind of art which differs fundamentally from painting, music, poetry, architecture and other fine arts.

Both phenomena employ anti-aesthetic and uncanny elements, as opposed to the institutional art which is supposed to give aesthetic pleasure and be easily fathomable. By means of kinetic gesture they provoke an unpredictable chain of events that affect both the artist/holy fool and the crowd. The "spectacle" overturns the dominant categories; the social outcast (i.e. the artist/*iurodivyi*) ascends to the status of a "law-abiding citizen", whereas the latter becomes

⁸³ Vielikie Minei Chet'i, 1-3 Oktiabr' (St. Petersburg, 1870), col. 90 (Zhitie Andreia Tsaregradskogo), (in:) Panchenko 1984, "Iurodstvo kak zrelishche". (Quoted here from *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, trans. Priscilla Hunt, Svitlana Kobets, Bethany Braley, Priscilla Hunt-Svitlana Kobets eds. 2011. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, p. 55. All quotations from Panchenko in the present work come from this volume).

downgraded (as s/he takes part in the spectacle). The culture of holiday and marketplace is characteristic of Pavlenskii's art, as he also makes an active use of urban spaces. By the same token, setting a "precedent" (that is, an unanticipated situation that inserts ambiguity into the quotidian) seems to be one of his main artistic devices that can also be interpreted as a disruption of the mundane.⁸⁴

Pavlenskii's actions, just as the spectacles of the *iurodivyii*, have simultaneously a centrifugal and a centripetal dynamic. The action provoked by them involves the crowd. Pavlenskii manages to involve in his stunts not only casual observers, but also municipal services officers, and, in the later phases, the judicial and administrative authorities who paradoxically expand and enrich the initial action. The actions undertaken by the official bodies are aimed to neutralise Pavlenskii's behavioural precedent, ergo their forces are centripetal. For instance, the police documentation of *Fixation* gives a detailed account of the normalising process, which looks like a ritual dance around the artist. The initial stage of the action is reported in the following way: "Policemen approach Pavlenskii intermittently, and then go away".⁸⁵ In another fragment we read: "having walked around the naked man, I saw that his scrotum is fixed to the ground with a big nail";⁸⁶ and: "as I approached him, I saw a young man and the inspector Mokrausen and the driver Kutilin, who already were pushing people away from the man. The young man was naked, sitting on the cobblestones next to the mausoleum and looking on the cobbles, his head was down".⁸⁷ The to-ings and fro-ings of the official bodies have a centripetal dynamics. Clearly, mesmerized police officers want to neutralise the situation, but they do not know how. Indeed, Pavlenskii's non-verbal message was driven home and evokes the response. This situation bears all the hallmark paradoxes of Pavlenskii's art. On the one hand, he is in the centre as he carries out the action, but on the other, he is on the peripheral side due to his inaction. Significantly, from the peripheral zone he manages to provoke the centripetal and the centrifugal dynamics, which are not only seen in case of the police officers, but also in the movements of the crowd.

Approximately at 13:10 we were at the Spasskaia tower of the Moscow Kremlin. At that moment we saw that a big crowd that usually stands at the entrance to the Lenin Mausoleum, starts to disperse in different directions, and before the Mausoleum we saw a naked man sitting in front of the Mausoleum. We immediately made a decision to approach him to find out the reasons for him being in such a state.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ The term "precedent" will be henceforth used in this meaning in the present thesis.

⁸⁵ For the original cf. Attachment 6.

⁸⁶ For the original cf. Attachment 7.

⁸⁷ For the original cf. Attachment 8.

⁸⁸ For the original cf. Attachment 9.

This description gives a clear, factual account of the dynamics of the whole situation, as well as shows an inner framework of the action. It turns out that it hinges on the binary dichotomies of presence and absence, central and peripheral (including the interim stages of movement from and towards the centre), as well as vertical and horizontal. These categories are observable on a purely physical and semiotic level.

The realm of spectacle does not have a specific beginning or ending. It should be born in mind that Pavlenskii did his act in a place that swarms with police offices. Still, he managed to nail himself and undress (sic!) without being noticed.⁸⁹ A police officer recollects: “there came to me another officer on the beat and told that an emergency situation had happened; he pointed at a naked man sitting approximately 50 meters from me”.⁹⁰ The spectacle has befallen on the official bodies like a bolt from the blue; its beginning was unmarked and so was its end. By no means should we assume that the stunt reaches its final point with the arrival of the paramedics. In the report we read that the artist remained in his initial position even when placed on a stretcher.⁹¹ Even more interestingly, police officers found no trace of a hammer, the clothes of the artist or sheds of blood: “these were neither on the cobblestones, nor on the nail or the young man’s scrotum. When we were extracting the nail, the young man was neither speaking nor screaming”.⁹² The spectacle had neither theatrical properties nor decoration. In the interview, Pavlenskii admitted that he was extremely careful not to drive the nail through a vein, as he did not want to have any additional “decoration”.⁹³

To recapitulate, the present subchapter was devoted to the setting as a crucial component of Petr Pavlenskii’s art. That the setting and the message of the action are closely connected is a foregone conclusion. Still, their interrelation has far-reaching implications and intricate dynamics in the case of Pavlenskii’s actions. The artist aptly employs de-territorialised (reformulated) symbols in unanticipated contexts, thus setting a certain “precedent”. Consequently, we can observe a continuous, circular paradigm shift. More often than not, we spoke of the central-peripheral category slippage. Still, as it has been highlighted, the triad of binary oppositions is not mutually exclusive. Conversely, a change of one coordinate causes a shift in another. This surprising synergy of contradictory elements provokes an aporic moment, which can be interpreted as an interpretative dilemma for the viewer. Ambiguity is a feature that makes Pavlenskii’s art similar to *iurodstvo*. Among other characteristics shared by both

⁸⁹ The detailed description of the action comes from the author’s interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 21 April 2015.

⁹⁰ For the original cf. Attachment 10.

⁹¹ Cf. Attachment 11.

⁹² Cf. Attachment 12.

⁹³ Author’s interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 21 April 2015.

phenomena, one can mention theatricality and the extensive use of public places. Both the artist and the holy fool initiate a spectacle which scenario is not fully written. This incompleteness is a source of unpredictability and therefore has a huge artistic potential. The roles played by the artist/*iurodivyi* are also very alike; they act and direct, but also view the performance. The social significance of their utterance is also very similar; they both speak in the name of higher values.

2.3.3.4. The Kinetic Phrase

In the studies on *iurodstvo*, the kinetic phrase, as Panchenko (2011: 81) puts it, is an act of provocation, a gesture that is made with a view to engaging the audience and evoking response. It is no coincidence that the metaphorical language of Pavlenskii's actions is based on gestures. Both phenomena employ universally iconic signifiers which in the course of their actions attain a new, symbolic dimension.

Pavlenskii is reluctant to use the word “provocation”, as for him it means causing somebody's negative reaction (e.g. slapping a policeman in the face). He prefers to call his action a gesture. Still, it seems to be just a matter of linguistic pettiness, as provocation does not necessarily mean assault. Semiotically speaking, it is understood rather as a “spur” for another action. Significantly, at this point we tackle the so-called performer's paradox that proceeds from the premise that the artist/*iurodivyi* “leads people into temptation and confusion when his/ her aesthetic feat demands that it should guide them onto the path of virtue” (Panchenko 2011: 65). If this has been an interpretative dilemma for the holy fools' hagiographers, then for Pavlenskii it is his departure point. His actions are meant to have centrifugal implications; they should resonate both on the social and the official level. Centrifugal force is one of the artist's key objectives:

It is important for me that my gesture brings about other gestures, so that someone else – an artist, an actor, a musician, whoever – could see it and make a gesture of his own.⁹⁴

Structurally speaking, these kinaesthetic phrases of Pavlenskii and of the *iurodivye* are based on the same premise, i.e. a clash of styles. A gesture that represents (peripheral) non-culture is performed in the realm of high culture. In this way this act enriches the official culture by means of low culture. This tension between the two extremes serves as a reservoir of motifs. This, in turn, brings us back to the notion of fragmented reality. It has been stated that Pavlenskii detects multiple internal displacements in the system and arranges them in a more universal, obtainable manner. Pavlenskii's first action was spurred by the show trial of Pussy Riot members. He says:

⁹⁴ <http://artchronika.ru/persona/pavlensky-interview/> (accessed 29 September 2015).

I didn't take Pussy Riot seriously. The negative response they provoked from the structures of power, though, has made them one of the most significant phenomena of the political art in Russia today.⁹⁵

He elaborates on this issue:

Their trial affected me more than many things in my own life. I started looking at other people and wondering why they were not doing anything. And this was when I had the important realisation that you should not wait for things from other people. You need to do things yourself.⁹⁶

The lack of public outcry against the trial, as well as the overreaction of the authorities, spurred Pavlenskii to make his own statement. Since both freedom of speech and social *élan vital* were having a hard time in Russia at that moment, it seems plausible to conclude that Pavlenskii's art came into being out of absence. The loss of vital force has brought Russians to a state of indifference and apathy, which is observable on the personal and social levels. By taking an action, the artist not only wanted to protest against the lack of freedom of expression, but also endeavoured to shake the status quo. Thus, his actions were twofold and had two target audiences, i.e. the society and the authorities. On the one hand, he wanted to give a fresh impetus to the society, and on the other, to enter into dialogue with the authorities. Pavlenskii states:

I am not asking people to hammer nails through their scrotums. I am taking this radical form to call people to action – their own, in their own chosen form.⁹⁷

The notion of an “active individual” (*deistvuiushchaia edinitsa*) is a central principle for Pavlenskii. He maintains that if you do not deal with politics, then the politics start to deal with you (Pavlenskii 21 April 2015).

It was a very important step for me – to understand what happens when a person becomes an artist, when a person becomes stronger than his/her indifference and overcomes his/her inertia. I don't think an artist can exist without this and just be isolated and contemplative. An artist has no right not to take a stand.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Laurie Tuffery. 28 July 2012. “INTERVIEW: Pussy Riot Protest Artist”, *The Quietus*, <http://thequietus.com/articles/09489-pussy-riot-protest-artist-sewed-mouth-petr-pavlensky> (accessed 22 September 2015).

⁹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square> (accessed 21 September 2015).

⁹⁷ <http://animalnewyork.com/2013/interview-petr-pavlensky-anarchist-artist-nailed-balls-red-square-dont/> (accessed 22 September 2015).

⁹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square> (accessed 22 September 2015)

Pavlenskii does take a stand, but his utterances are not just directed at the authorities. He tries to address both society and official bodies. In creating a nuisance, there is a didactic endeavour for everyone. Here, again, we detect a striking similarity between the artist and the *iurodivye*, who do not distinguish between a beggar and a magnate when they address them (Panchenko 2011: 121). Nevertheless, it would be a simplification to claim that the art of Pavlenskii is equal to the spiritual feat of holy fools. It should be born in mind that the former condemns flaws in the social structure, while the latter castigate violation of Christian values.

Still, the closeness of Pavlenskii's profile to the paradigm of *iurodstvo* is demonstrable if we take into account the exposure of social vices, with which both phenomena are indissolubly linked. Especially the discourse with the authorities is of essence for Pavlenskii's art. The above-mentioned example demonstrates a coincidental yet significant tendency. Pavlenskii's objective is twofold: first, the pursuit of objectivising the authorities, and second, making art by "the hands of the authorities". He claims:

My goal is to create a particular situation, using only minimal components. The government tries to make society and the individual into objects of their authority, to objectify them. My goal is to create situations which pull the governing bodies inside and objectify them, when they intervene and develop the action, at the point when I am already not doing anything. I am just sitting there, or lying down. I do not make another action or effort. I just stay still and not react, and they are forced to participate. That is one of the main elements – to make the instruments of governmental powers produce artwork. They cannot neutralise me, really, because they are now performing in the action.⁹⁹

Pavlenskii enters into dialogue with the authorities by means of the art of direct action (*iskusstvo priamogo deistviia*). He makes creative use of aesthetic distance, understood as "a separation between the audience and a work of art that is necessary for the audience to recognise and appreciate the work as an aesthetic object" (Murfin – Ray 2009: 5). Pavlenskii erases evaluative boundaries, thus allowing for setting a "precedent", that is, to repeat once again, an unanticipated situation that inserts ambiguity into the quotidian. This act has numerous implications. First and foremost, the violation of aesthetic distance allows for a kind of polycentrism, i.e. a construction which offers the viewer a multiplicity of perspectives, none of which is considered to be peripheral. Secondly, seldom is the interplay between central – peripheral, vertical – horizontal and absence – presence as suggestive as in this context. All utterances to some degree encompass these binary models, yet they are not reducible to each

⁹⁹ <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22278/1/earlobe-slicing-artist-petr-pavlensky-i-feel-excellent> (accessed 24 September 2015).

other and are not in a binary opposition to each other. Rather, they are constructed isomorphically; one opposition is not transgressed but converted into another opposition.

It has already been stated that Pavlenskii's actions have a circular form. Nevertheless, by diminishing the importance of aesthetic value (proximity), he allows for other displacements. The vector of discourse with the authorities can be broken down into horizontal and vertical components. The action, meant as a message to the authorities, is "posted" to the authorities, which, in their will to neutralise it, give a response to the sender. The moment when they take over the initiative, both the artist and the official bodies become reciprocal. Every step that the official bodies take to neutralise the action drags them further into it. We may argue that the artist provokes an aporic moment in which the authorities find it difficult to choose the right course of action. They are put in a sticky situation, where every move works to the benefit of the artist.

Significantly, the inner dynamics of the authoritative side of this discourse seems to have its own pattern. Setting a "precedent" presupposes immersing police officers in the peripheral zone, i.e. a space where the long arm of the law does not reach. Having lost their anchorage point, they call for their superior officers, who in turn call for other superior officers. This process implies the upward movement. This dead-end situation, as Pavlenskii puts it, demonstrates the inner structure of the system. In this way the scope of participants keeps enlarging, which allows us to conclude that Pavlenskii's actions have centrifugal implications.

2.3.3.5. "Just as He Emerged from his Mother's Womb"¹⁰⁰ – the Body in Pavlenskii's Art

The extensive use of body is another shared feature of *iurodstvo* and Pavlenskii's art. Extrinsicly speaking, both phenomena employ nudity, dramatic gestures, silence and mortification of the flesh. Even if holy foolery and Pavlenskii's art are based on different premises, the fact remains that they share a close aesthetic affinity.

Pavlenskii admits that the dramatic tension between an individual and the authorities is at the centre of his artistic interests. Via self-mutilating acts, the artist analyses cultural tasks, imposed on an individual human body, and also investigates the situation in which the society finds itself. In the latter instance, the body of the artist is by way of *pars pro toto* referring to "the social body". In addition, the notion of body functions in a broader array of meanings in Pavlenskii's art. Suffice it to mention such categories as safety, nudity, bio-politics, pain and madness to see the complexity and significance of this category.

¹⁰⁰ IRLI, Drevlekhranilishche, Karel'skoe sobranie, no. 127, fol. 3v, fol. 9v, (in:) Panchenko 2011: 67.

Aesthetically, Pavlenskii's art bears resemblance to artistic movements ranging from Viennese Actionism and Body Art to the Happening. The former was characterised by atrocious performances that foreshadowed the sado-masochistic techniques implemented later within the scope of body art and behavioural art. As the name suggest, in Body Art it is the flesh that is the vehicle for the message. Importantly, this movement is focused on exploring the artist's emotions and experiences with his/her own body, rather than on evoking public reaction. The latter is an artistic project that seeks to involve the spectator as a central and active part. To achieve that, the artist invades the urban space by means of an extraordinary event, accompanied by music or other theatrical devices. More often than not, the Happening is recorded and documented with pictures. Still, it is clear that Pavlenskii's art pertains also to the Russian tradition of performance and body paint by, respectively, Andrei Monastyrskii and the artistic duo of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Monastyrskii is a Moscow-based conceptual artist who started to operate in the 1970s. He established a "Collective Actions" group that delivered over a hundred performances, called "actions", mainly outside the city of Moscow. The aesthetic thrust of their pursuit were new meanings and epiphany. Goncharova and Larionov were representatives of the pre-Revolutionary Moscow avant-garde circle. They used their bodies as canvas on which they would paint images and offensive phrases, only to appear in public, especially in the posh parts of the city. It can therefore be concluded that Pavlenskii's art is deeply anchored in the conceptual art of both western and eastern traditions.

The thrust of Pavlenskii's utterances is to denote pathological processes in the Russian socio-political body. He maintains that the authorities need people as biological building blocks for creating nationalism and imperialism. The government is equipped with a whole range of institutions that ensure civil obedience, which the artist describes by a derogatory term – "the animal-like submission" (*zhivotnaia pokornost'*). He says:

The system of disciplinary institutions that takes every potential human body under its control and strictly forms joint generations of overworked uteri, vaginas and labour departments, does not leave room for any space or steps aside. Maternal care, kindergartens, schools, universities and a stable paid job with reliable employment duties – all these continuously work for this system.¹⁰¹

For the artist, living in the pervasive power of paternalism is tantamount to being incarcerated. He works with instruments of the power such as media, medicine and the legislative and education system to destroy the "decoration" made by the authorities. Pavlenskii

¹⁰¹ <http://matterofmalaise.blogspot.no/2014/07/performing-against-russian.html>, (accessed 05 October 2015).

uses his own body as a legitimate part of this society, and also as a form of synecdoche. What he does to his own body simultaneously applies to the social body (and vice versa). By producing living statues he pushes some trigger points and waits for the reaction. He explicates:

People follow a whole scope of conventions. One may work with the semantic system by means of disturbance. The way the social body starts to react and respond to it shows that it ceases to function properly. When the system finds itself in a dead-end situation, it starts to act. Here is the moment when the reflection comes. It can create something new.¹⁰²

Pavlenskii performs a vivisection on the society, and diagnoses its maladies with acute precision. It is not a coincidence that practically all his actions depict an imprisoned individual. Each particular action defines the area of personal freedom that is recused by Russian authorities; *Seam* – freedom of speech, *Carcass* – a repressive legislative system, *Fixation* – impossibility to protest and change the reality, *Separation* – the politically motivated use of psychiatry. In all these instances we observe a severe restriction on rights and liberties of a person in an oppressive system. I deliberately omit the Maidan action, *Liberty*, because it is structurally different from the other ones. First of all, it was performed by a collective of artists (actionists). Secondly, as Pavlenskii highlights, this was the only artistic utterance devoted to freedom rather than to an imprisoned individual.

The notion of body becomes even more interesting if we look at it from the biopolitical point of view. It is a concept that on the one hand designates the socio-political power over an individual, but on the other presents a state as a “pseudo-biological organism” (Lemke 2011: 9-10). Pavlenskii underscores that the Russian language abounds in formulations of biopolitical origin, such as “*organy vlasti*” (authorities, literally “organs of power”) or “*organy pravleniia*” (government, literally “organs of governance”). Consequently, seen from this perspective, the body can be investigated on three levels, i.e. the individual, the social and the political.

Four out of five actions by Pavlenskii are body-oriented. The artist violates the culturally imposed taboo on the body which include pain and nudity. If pain is virtually excluded from the official discourse (everyone should be fit and healthy), then nudity has always been regarded as a “step into liberation”.¹⁰³ As for the pain, Pavlenskii stresses that it is neither a meaning-creating element nor a channel of communication in his actions. Importantly, nakedness is one of the most significant features of *iurodstvo*. Its symbolic meaning is twofold; it can mean either

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Petr Pavlenskii, 21 April 2015.

¹⁰³ <http://osocio.org/message/nudity-as-activism-interview-with-petr-pavlensky-red-square-artist/> (accessed 08 October 2015).

the soul, equanimity towards the corporal or, quite to the contrary, sin and amorality.¹⁰⁴ In this respect Pavlenskii's art exhibits characteristics of *iurodstvo*. "Nakedness is the holy fool's ideal costume", asserts Panchenko (2011: 67). As it turns out, nudity is a viable device in the field of contemporary political art. This fact should be barely surprising if we take into account that *iurodstvo* is also regarded as a social reproach.

In his intention to make a nuisance of himself to attract attention to significant issues, Pavlenskii flouts the conventional understanding of body. It is hardly a coincidence that the official bodies want to neutralise his actions by covering the naked artist (fig. 4). Also in this instance we can recognise elements of the holy foolish paradigm. Holy fools themselves used "palliatives" such as loincloth to combine sanctity and carnality. Significantly, also pious hagiographers were covering "private parts" of holy fools to make them appear more decent (cf.ch. 1, p. 5-6).



Figure 4. Neutralisation of nudity. Courtesy of the artist.

"Genuine *iurodivye* of this kind there were not many, because it is a very hard and cold profession to go naked in Russia, especially in winter" (Fletcher 1966: 122). Indeed, nudity implies suffering from cold. Here too, Pavlenskii, just like a holy fool, seems to be oblivious to near freezing temperatures. He remains motionless, irrespective of weather conditions. He remains silent. That reminds us of hagiographic accounts in which divine fools mortified "the perishable flesh" (Panchenko 2011: 67).¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, one of the sine qua non features of

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Panchenko 2011: 67-69.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Prokopii Viatskii's vitae: Having repudiated the world and all its finery, he wore no perishable clothing, toiling with his naked body for the Christ (...) Just as he emerged from his mother's womb, thus he also walked unashamedly before men, avoiding neither the frost nor the burning sun. GBL, *Sobranie Undol'skogo*, no. 361, fol. 4v (*Zhitie Prokopii Viatskogo*), (in:) Panchenko 2011: 67.

iurodstvo is glossolalia (speaking in tongues) with its binary opposition, that is, when silence is understood as a condemnatory speech.

Culturally, nudity goes hand in hand with madness. Indeed, Pavlenskii was compelled to undergo psychiatric evaluation after each of his actions. Many a time the authorities tried to evaluate his psychiatric condition also after *Liberty*, but he refused. The combat lasted so long that Pavlenskii took the artistic liberty to make the Serbskii institute the setting of his hitherto latest action. He went through a psychiatric analysis there with a statement that he was of sound mind. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the attempts to classify Pavlenskii as insane were made to undermine his artistic endeavours.

The discussion of the importance of the body brings us to a curious paradox again; the (seemingly) passive body of the artist breaks the routine, its inactivity provokes action. The immobility makes Pavlenskii as if absent (detached), but simultaneously it is the present yet inert figure of the artist that helps the viewer understand the message of the action.

Let us focus on yet another important (and conceivably the most sensational) aspect of Pavlenskii's art, namely the pain. The artist himself asserts:

Pain implies no meaning in my actions. It is not an element of communication in my work. It is not a factor I emphasise. My preparation is much more psychological than physical. If any unpredicted physical damage occurs during the action, it is not a big deal. I am practical; I am not beating a nail into my forehead or into my eye. I am not nailing my testicles, but the flesh of the scrotal sack. When I was inside the barbed wire, the spikes were only about 2 cm long. They scratch and puncture the flesh, but that's it, really. That heals.¹⁰⁶

Pavlenskii's approach to body and pain breaks the mould. Apart from the socio-political message he conveys, the artist is also trying to show that people nowadays tend to have an unrealistic, if not hysterical, attitude towards their own bodies:

How we relate to the body seems to me a little bit imposed. The body is sturdy material, and the pain is often a fear, a phobia.¹⁰⁷

In Pavlenskii's actions pain acquires a new, transcendental aspect. The artist overcomes his own fears and limitations compelled by authorities and society. He explicates:

¹⁰⁶ <http://animalnewyork.com/2013/interview-petr-pavlensky-anarchist-artist-nailed-balls-red-square-dont/> (accessed 08 October 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Baker. 11 December 2013. "First interview with Pyotr Pavlensky following his arrest for anti-fascist art action "Fixation" in Moscow's Red Square, *Revolution News*, <http://revolution-news.com/first-interview-pyotr-pavlensky-following-arrest-anti-fascist-art-action-fixation-moscows-red-square/> (accessed 09 October 2015).

At this moment, at this point of no return [when the action is taking place], I experience a sense of liberation. All these imposed artificial structures and fears – the fear of pain, the fear of authority – dissolve, and I see the reality. I am in the here and now. I am alive. And I am no longer an object.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, the body is not a goal, but a means of three-level discourse that involves the authorities, the society and the self.

To recapitulate, the thrust of the present subchapter was to decipher the importance of the body in the behavioural code of Pavlenskii's actions. Interestingly, we can identify a semiotic bridge between Pavlenskii's art and the *iurodivye* in terms of the use of the body. The artist implements devices akin to holy foolery, such as nudity, self-mutilation and silence. Although both phenomena are based on different theoretical premises, they undeniably play an important social role. In both instances, the act of provocation is achieved by means of overturning categories governing the normative components of conduct. By breaking the taboo on body, the artist/*iurodivyi* alienates him-/herself from the society to disconcert the viewer and in doing so they disturb the quotidian. This, in turn, is supposed to start a dialogue between the performer and the recipient.

2.3.3.6. The Use of the Mass Media

Pavlenskii's actions are aimed at entering a dialogue with both the authorities and the society. The actions' purpose is twofold; on the one hand, they should reveal the hidden patterns of oppressive political power, and on the other, work as an eye-opener for the viewers. In this way the artist realises his creed: speak, deny, resist (*govori, oprovergai, soprotivlaisia*).

Indeed, in Pavlenskii's case we really can speak of a dialogue with the authorities. As I will show, the artist does receive a response to his appeals. In the present subchapter, I am going to investigate two platforms for this dialogue, i.e. the mass media and the official documentation. Let us first unpick the importance of the media in the dialogue between Pavlenskii and the authorities.

Pavlenskii uses the media extensively and strategically. Just to recapitulate briefly, his actions are diligently documented with photographs, videos and official artistic manifestoes. The artist opens his works to any interpretation, highlighting that the perception of any artwork is very subjective, as it depends on personal traits (not to mention knowledge) of the viewer. Pavlenskii is of egalitarian opinion that materials concerning his art belong to the cultural

¹⁰⁸ <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensky-performance-art-protest> (accessed 09 October 2015).

information field, and therefore should be accessible to everyone free of charge. However, the way the authorities use the media in their dialogue with Pavlenskii is the opposite side of the same coin. Generally speaking, the tactic of the authorities hinges on the principle of category slippage. More often than not, the artist is presented as mentally ill, which, according to my interpretative approach in this thesis, might be interpreted as moving Pavlenskii from the central to the peripheral zone. Being aware of the fact that the official media can present one-sided information, Pavlenskii tries to make his actions minimal and self-evident. He asserts:

The media attempt to distort things, but these are acts that are hard to distort. Whatever you say or write about these actions, a chopped-off earlobe remains a chopped-off earlobe, a scrotum nailed to a square is always a scrotum nailed to a square and a man wrapped up in barbed wire is still a man wrapped in a barbed wire. These acts define a certain political viewpoint and the message will always get through, one way or another, to its intended audience.¹⁰⁹

Still, as it turns out, even self-explanatory acts can be interpreted in a biased way. For instance, a pro-Putin TV channel, Life News, gave a sensationalist coverage of *Fixation*, while *Separation* was presented in a rather ironic manner (fig. 5 and 6).



Figure 5. Caption: Suicide Attempt. The artist Petr Pavlenskii is taken to hospital after a loud action. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii

¹⁰⁹ <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensk.y-performance-art-protest> (accessed 10 October 2015).



Figure 6. In Van Gogh’s style. The artist Petr Pavlenskii cuts his earlobe with a knife in an act of protest. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

The captions are clearly evaluative, with an element of irony. Other captions include such comments as “a scandalous sketch” (*skandal’nyi étiud*) and “the painter of Maidan” (*zhivopisets Maidana*), both of which applied to *Liberty*.¹¹⁰ Significantly, it is not just the media but the official bodies themselves which endeavour to marginalise Pavlenskii’s utterances. By way of example, Vladimir Medinskii, the Minister of Culture, when asked about Pavlenskii, tried to discredit the artist by alluding that the latter is not mentally sane (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Caption: Pavlenskii’s actions are alien to Medinskii. Medinskii advises to address questions about Pavlenskii to the museum of psychiatry. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

It can be argued that we witness an ongoing dialogue between Pavlenskii and the authorities. Both sides keep attacking and provoking each other. To illustrate this point, one can mention that in September 2014, Russian media issued reports that Pavlenskii, in his allegedly last

¹¹⁰ Materials available at: <http://lifenews.ru/news/127856> and <http://lifenews.ru/news/127754> (accessed 12 October 2015).

performance, tried to hang himself in a political protest. The artist replied on his Facebook: “It is a great story. But I, if anything, did not hang myself”.¹¹¹ It is hard to comment on this incident without putting forward highly hypothetical assumptions. Still, we may put forward a hypothesis that the authorities thus “initiated”, not to say provoked, a “dialogue” with Pavlenskii. Conceivably, it was a “kinetic phrase” performed by the authorities.

The media obviously give biased reports to discredit Pavlenskii either by presenting him as mentally ill or by adopting an ironic stance. We can therefore argue that he is placed in the peripheral ambit, so that the importance of his utterances is diminished. Interestingly, the paradigmatic centre–periphery model is continued after the action has been finished. Demonstrable as they are, Pavlenskii’s actions seem to be composed of several acts. The legal documentation and pictures taken by the police enlarge and enrich the action, forming a “sequel” to it. Pavlenskii multiplies the chain of shifts and deconstructions; elements are moved from the central to the peripheral ambit and vice versa. Legal and/or medical documents are confidential. Still, the artist turns them to light to realise his aim which is demonstrating patterns of authoritative control. By way of example, Pavlenskii, by publishing transcripts of legal documents on his Facebook page, plays with the categories of centre and periphery. We may therefore conclude that the “legal war” on confidential documents is an integral part of Pavlenskii’s actions. Even though in a changed form and setting, his utterances live on.

In the “first act” of his stunts the artist makes use of the urban setting where he aptly entangles the officials in his actions. The second, and subsequent, acts take place in less accessible settings, such as courts, custodies and interrogation rooms. This paradigmatic shift is observable not only in the central-periphery dimension. We can also pinpoint the vertical – horizontal category slippage. If we previously put forward an assumption that the dialogue between the authorities and the artist has a vertical, downward vector, then now we may conclude that “the second stage” of Pavlenskii’s actions have a vertical upward vector. In other words, the artist is “upgraded” and taken from an “unofficial setting” to the realm of the official one. Pavlenskii’s interaction with the authorities forms a ritualised dialogue of a certain kind. It is precisely the dramatic clash of the official and the unofficial cultural codes that produces such a strong utterance. Pavlenskii’s closeness to the authorities can be interpreted as a proximity of the last and the first in social structure. Here again, we can detect a similarity between Pavlenskii’s art and *iurodstvo*. Denunciation of tsars was a *sine qua non* part of holy

¹¹¹ Russian Activist Denies He Tried to Hang Himself on Red Square, *The Moscow Times*, 04 September 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article.php?id=506419> (accessed 10 October 2015).

foolery, and Russian hagiographies would devote attention to this topos. Panchenko (2011: 121) goes as far as concurring that the stereotype of a holy foolish denunciator, who stays in direct contact with a tsar, becomes deeply anchored in the Russian tradition.

Let us now turn to the role of documentation in Pavlenskii's utterances. In order to demonstrate the artist's technique of involving legal documents in his actions, I will use a medical description issued in the Serbskii institute after *Separation*. The first record made on the day of the action, i.e. 19. 10. 2014, sounded as follows:

19. 10. 2014 a psychiatrist, 21:00. Diagnosis: A severe polymorphous psychotic disturbance with self-aggressive behaviour. An amputation of the right earlobe. Given the medical history, worsening of endogenous disease cannot be excluded. (...) In accordance with his psychological state [Pavlenskii] can be placed in an intensive care unit. Recommendation: observation of the patient's behaviour (...) ¹¹²

Only a day later, the authorities refuted its own accusation of Pavlenskii's alleged mental illness by issuing a legal document (see attachment 3):

20. 10. 2014, a psychiatrist, 10:30: Conclusion: Self-mutilation (an amputation of the right earlobe) with a demonstrative aim. Signs of severe psychotic disturbance, which might pose a threat to him or others, are not revealed. In accordance with article 29 of the RF law on psychiatric help, indications for involuntary hospitalisation in psychiatric ward in emergency mode are not revealed. The psychic condition allows treatment in a general departments or outpatient.

We can conclude that the above-mentioned documentation plays an important role in Pavlenskii's art. In its odd manner it prolongs the actions and strengthens their message. It demonstrates mechanisms that govern the legal system, its dependencies and inner contradiction. Pavlenskii's artistic credo that includes performing art with the hands of authorities proves productive even in a medical and legal setting. His actions can be compared to a stone thrown into a pond; they cause a circular ripple spread with an increasing radius. The medical/legal system is yet another realm in which Pavlenskii's actions have a centrifugal force.

In sum, the thrust of this section was to present the key elements in the discourse between Petr Pavlenskii and the authorities. In the light of the given arguments, we may conclude that Pavlenskii's actions penetrate deep into the state structures and make an artwork out of unanticipated material (i.e. legal/medical documentation). This unprecedented step has far-reaching implications. First, it prolongs the action itself and enriches its context. Second, it

¹¹² For the original cf. Attachment 13.

entangles the official bodies in the artist's utterances on higher levels of the administrative ladder, which in turn demonstrates the hierarchy of the system and its internal interconnections. Significantly, the seeds of discord that Pavlenskii plants do take roots. Thus, the authorities start to take actions in response to the actions of Pavlenskii.

Conclusions

The present thesis makes a huge hermeneutic loop: the present – the past – the present. Inspired by the contemporary art of Petr Pavlenskii, this work takes the reader on a journey in time to Medieval Russia and navigates through a bicentennial research tradition to bring you back to the streets of modern metropolises of Moscow and St Petersburg.

“There is nothing new under the sun” (*novoe – khorosho zabytoe staroe*), goes the adage. Since the current work investigates Petr Pavlenskii as a case study of the paradigm of *iurodstvo* in modern Russian art, it is worthwhile, if not absolutely necessary, to get back to the roots of this phenomenon in order to understand its origins, as well as multifarious (re)interpretations in the research field. Therefore, chapter one covers the history of Russian holy foolery and the analysis of its theoretical accounts. I have sketched briefly a developmental and cultural history of *iurodstvo* to demonstrate the complexity of this notion, and even more importantly, to outline scholarly interpretations of holy foolery. We may argue, in the view of this analysis, that *iurodstvo* functions in a broad array of contexts. It seems to be especially useful for explicating postmodern culture characterised by dissensus, value shifts and reformulation of symbols. Thanks to some common features, postmodernism seems to be confluent with holy foolery. Thus, the latter broadens and expands the analytical perspective of contemporary cultural productions.

The second chapter consists of two parts. The initial one is a prelude to the main analysis of Petr Pavlenskii’s works, and offers an insight to the non-conformist protest movement in the late- and post-Soviet period. The thrust of presenting this part of Russian art history is manifold. First and foremost, the depiction of the dissident art as a perennial process helps us see Pavlenskii’s art through the prism of a long and time-honoured tradition of counterculture. Even more importantly, Russian dissensual art reveals aesthetic affinity with holy foolery. Many a stylised holy fool appeared in that period to challenge the consensus and expose social vices. By alienating themselves from the society, unofficial artists embodied the holy foolish denunciators. In the late-Soviet period, we observe a re-interpretation of the Symbolist notion of the so-called *zhiznetvorchestvo*, that is, an everyday aesthetics of living. Significantly, the conflation of two elements, life and creation, also proves useful in the analysis of Pavlenskii’s art. Hagiographic sources abound with details from personal lives of holy fools. They all follow a pattern of alienation, margin and re-union. Thus, we may argue that in this respect (and many other) contemporary art bears aesthetic resemblance with the holy foolish behavioural paradigm.

Secondly, the dissident art was nurtured on Russian folklore (cf. Yurchak 2006: 239). The “wise fool” is a typical protagonist of many traditional fairy tales. At that point we can argue that non-conformist artists fall into the category of *skomorokhi*, that is, wandering minstrels-jesters popular since at least the Kievan Rus’ period. Still, the similarity is only superficial, if we take into account the fact that *skomorokhi* would carry out their performances for the sake of entertainment, while holy fools via their “spectacles” provided the audience with spiritual admonition. Clearly, non-conformist artists have a deep message to convey. Structurally speaking, the performances of artists and *iurodivye* are alike; they constitute an aesthetic rupture of the quotidian, reformulate symbols, as well as a mirror or/and a comment on the political climate. All these features bring us back to holy fools who doubled as canonical saints and a social seismograph.

Thirdly, the representatives of non-conformist art deliberately stayed clear of the official discourse, thus placing themselves in the peripheral zone. The status reversal, i.e. self-degradation, subtly evokes holy fools. Both dissident artists and *iurodivye* played a significant, central role of a social pariah from the ‘*vne-* position’. Alienation, especially in case of late-Soviet artists, also had a very practical dimension, as you cannot take away anything from a person who owes nothing. Thus, we may argue that kenotic elements form the underlying principle detectable in the late- and post- Soviet period.

Having caught a few glimpses of dissident and engagement art, we can see that its aesthetic affinity with *iurodstvo* is demonstrable. Generally speaking, the confluence of Russian protest movement and the tradition of holy foolery is *sui generis*.

In the main analysis I examine versatility of holy foolish behavioural paradigm as a critical device in Petr Pavlenskii’s works. In order to attain this objective, I have investigated the creative process against the backdrop of binary oppositions (centre – periphery, horizontal – vertical, absence – presence). The reason for adopting such categories was twofold. Firstly, I needed some platform of reference to be able to compare and contrast both phenomena. The above-mentioned are mentioned in the semiotic research of divine foolery, yet, to the best of my knowledge, they have not been implemented as an analytical tool in any research study of *iurodstvo*. Secondly, the dichotomous oppositions appear to reflect the apophatic tradition that is deeply rooted in the Russian cultural consciousness. Let us turn to the notion of the creative process. Since the term seems to be very broad and not very telling, I have distinguished some subcategories that semiotically correspond with holy foolery. They include lifestyle, decontextualisation, setting, the use of body (including nudity, pain), provocation and the use of media. The analysis has given surprising and thought-provoking results.

As it has turned out, Pavlenskii's works of art reveal an astonishing aesthetic and structural similarity to *iurodstvo*. Both Pavlenskii and the holy fools play a role of social denunciators. They both convey their message through the kinetic gesture that inserts chaos into orderly existence. The inner dynamics of their "spectacles" are also very analogous. They hinge on the principle of a continuous paradigmatic shift. Strikingly, the category slippage (central vs peripheral, horizontal vs vertical, absence vs presence) is fully transparent and accessible to the observer of Pavlenskii's actions. This is where the holy foolish behavioural paradigm proves versatile. It enables us to fathom Pavlenskii's art in terms that would not have traditionally been implemented. This, in turn, fosters a more nuanced understanding of his utterances.

At this point, I would like attract the reader's attention to a specific aspect of the present analysis. The triad has proved itself a viable diagnostic device. Yet the categories it embraces designate relation to a specific space, either in the middle point or at the edge of something, either on the top or on the bottom, either in a particular place or not in the place. Although the interrelation between them is very dynamic, the categories itself describe stable settings. In addition, in the course of my study, I have identified a high correlation between centrifugal and centripetal forces. They, in turn, contribute to our perception of the relationship between Pavlenskii and his "audience", so to speak. In contrast to "genuine *iurodivye*", the observers of Pavlenskii's actions are not homogenous. Generally speaking, we can distinguish between random viewers who just bear witness to the action, the official bodies (such as police, paramedics) and representatives of mass media. Pavlenskii's actions affect all three groups. He sets in motion an action (functioning as a centrifugal force) and waits for the answer (which functions as a centripetal force). Interestingly, he receives a response from his audience. Legal documentation and media coverage can also be treated as an example of a force drawn inward, towards the centre. In addition, the categories of central and peripheral (and centrifugal and centripetal) seem to be complementary. The category of the centre is, quite understandably, confluent with the centrifugal force. By analogy, the periphery should go together with the centripetal force. Still, due to polycentrism, i.e. the multiplicity of participants, the response spurred by Pavlenskii's actions reveals a centrifugal characteristic. The elaboration on the dynamics of Pavlenskii's artworks show that the ritualised dialogue, which is also an inherent part of *iurodstvo*, has developed and expanded in comparison to its medieval archetype.

Another interesting feature of Pavlenskii can be seen when compared with Actionism of the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, the street art was allusive to *iurodstvo*. Some artists, like the Blue Noses group, openly linked their creations with holy foolery, only to

demonstrate its uselessness in the modern context. More often than not, the paradigm of *iurodstvo* was used as a stylisation or a parody. It seems plausible to conclude that *iurodstvo* was used as a simulacrum, understood as a “mere image of a certain phenomenon devoid of its substance”. Paradoxically, Pavlenskii, who openly denies any connection between his art and *iurodstvo*, implements the cultural pattern of holy foolery. Conceivably, he is an example of the artist whose utterances embody the religious unconscious (Epstein). Even if this claim is highly hypothetical and barely verifiable, it still can tell us a lot. We may argue, however very carefully, that a case study of Petr Pavlenskii’s works shows that the behavioural paradigm of *iurodstvo* is indeed deeply anchored in the Russian worldview.

The present thesis has argued that holy foolery is a viable critical device in modern art. Even if Pavlenskii’s artistic utterances are accessible to the onlooker without mentioning the tradition of *iurodstvo*, the fact seems inescapable that analysing his art can be usefully undertaken through the prism of this cultural pattern. By throwing a semiotic bridge between contemporary artworks and divine foolery, we provide new perspectives on, and interpretations of, both.

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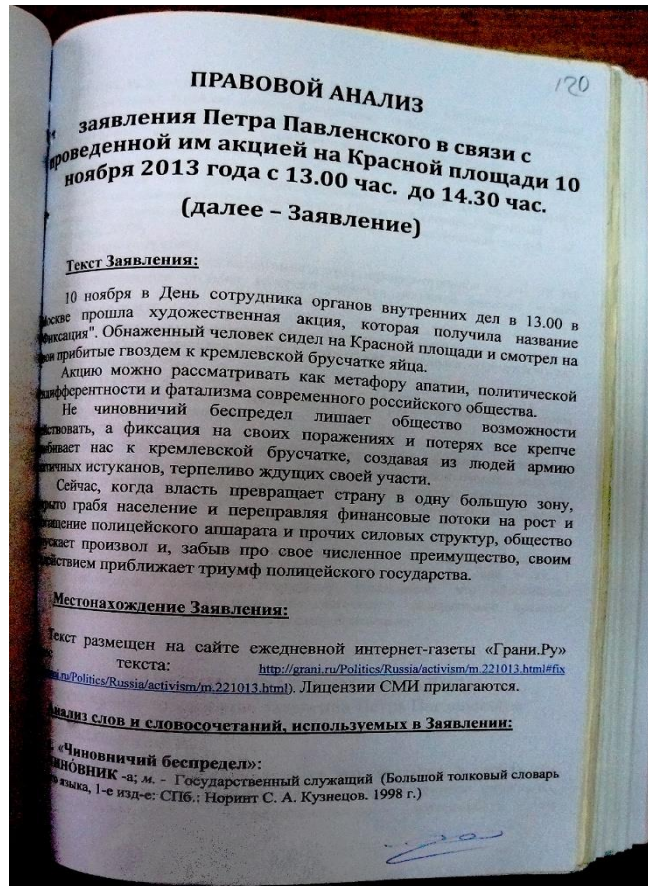
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Attachments:



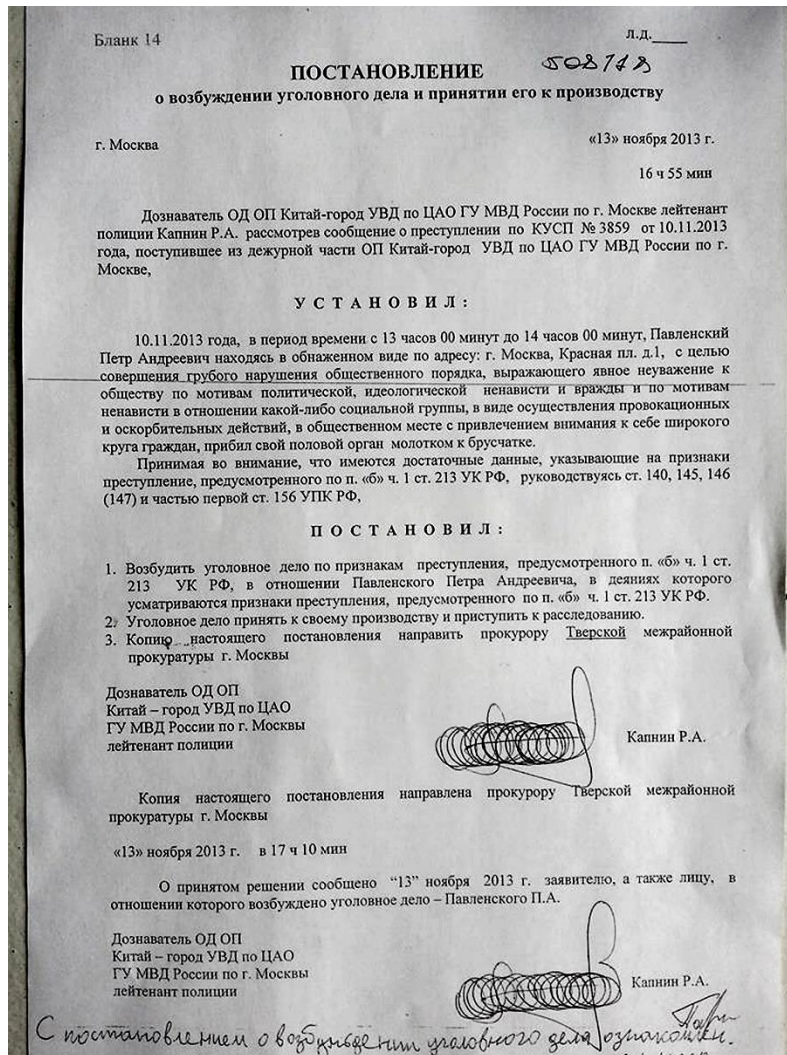
Attachment 1 The official statement of Pavlenskii after *Fixation*. By courtesy of the artist.

- показаниями свидетеля Курочкина А.Г., которому были разъяснены права, предусмотренные ст.25.6 КоАП РФ, сущность ст.51 Конституции РФ, предупрежден об ответственности по ст.17.9 КоАП РФ, пояснил, что 23.02.2014 около 08 утра он приехал к Храму «Спас на крови» со своей семье на утреннюю службу. Они увидели на Мало-Конюшенном мосту горящие автомобильные покрышки, рядом находились какие-то люди, которые что-то выкрикивали, один из них бил палками по металлическому листу, кто-то размахивал флагом. Он, Курочкин, сразу вызвал сотрудников полиции и пожарных. Когда он вышел со службы в Храме. (это было около 09 час. 30 мин.), пожар был потушен, сотрудники коммунальных служб расчищали мост от сгоревших покрышек, видел, что продуктами горения была повреждена (скорее всего, закопчена) позолота декоративной ограды моста. Как специалист в области реставрации может констатировать, что такого рода повреждения требуют определенных реставрационных мероприятий либо по очистке позолоты, либо по восстановлению ее слоя. Был глубоко возмущен действиями неизвестных, которые расценивает, как проявление вандализма;

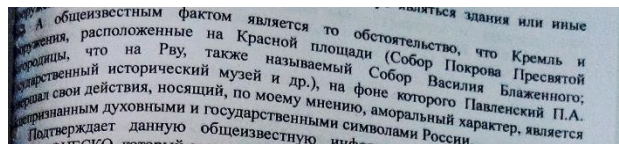
Attachment 2 The statement of an eye-witness to *Liberty*. Courtesy of the artist.

20.10.2014 психиатр, 10.30: Заключение: Самоповреждение (ампутация мочки правой ушной раковины) с демонстративной целью. Данных за острое психотическое расстройство, представляющее непосредственную опасность для себя, окружающих, не выявлено. В соответствии со ст. 29 закона РФ о психиатрической помощи - показаний для недобровольной госпитализации в психиатрическое отделение в экстренном порядке не выявлено. По психическому состоянию может лечиться в отделении общего типа, либо амбулаторно.

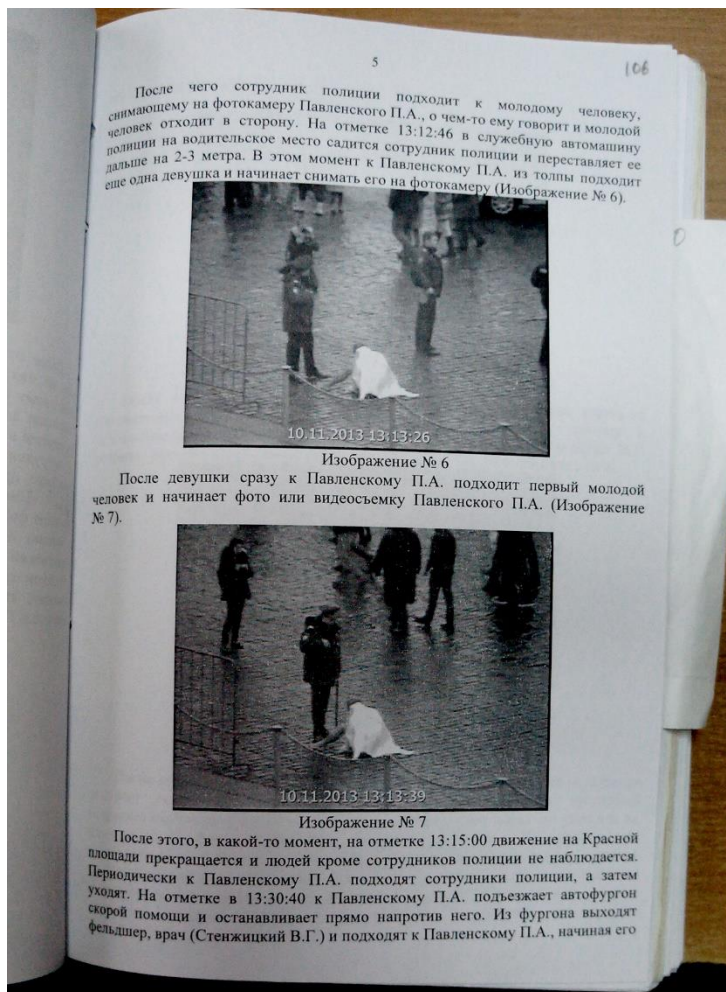
Attachment 3. Certificate of discharge from the Serbskii's centre. Doctor's assessment of Pavlenskii's psychic condition. Courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.



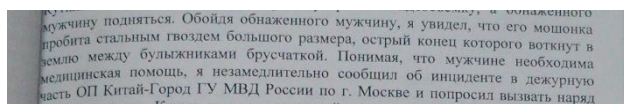
Attachment 4. The decision about instituting a criminal procedure against Pavlenskii after Fixation



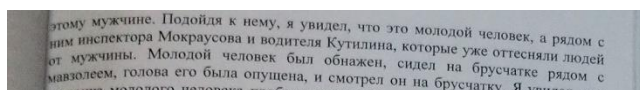
Attachment 5. The police report of Fixation.



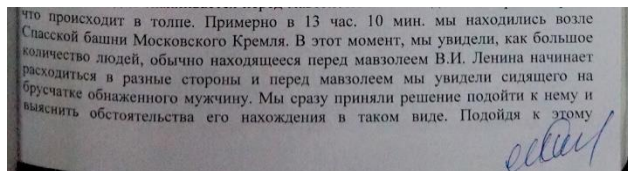
Attachment 6. The ritual dance. Police documentation of *Fixation*



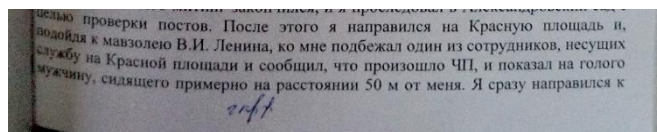
Attachment 7. The ritual dance. Police documentation of *Fixation*.



Attachment 8. The ritual dance. Police documentation of *Fixation*.

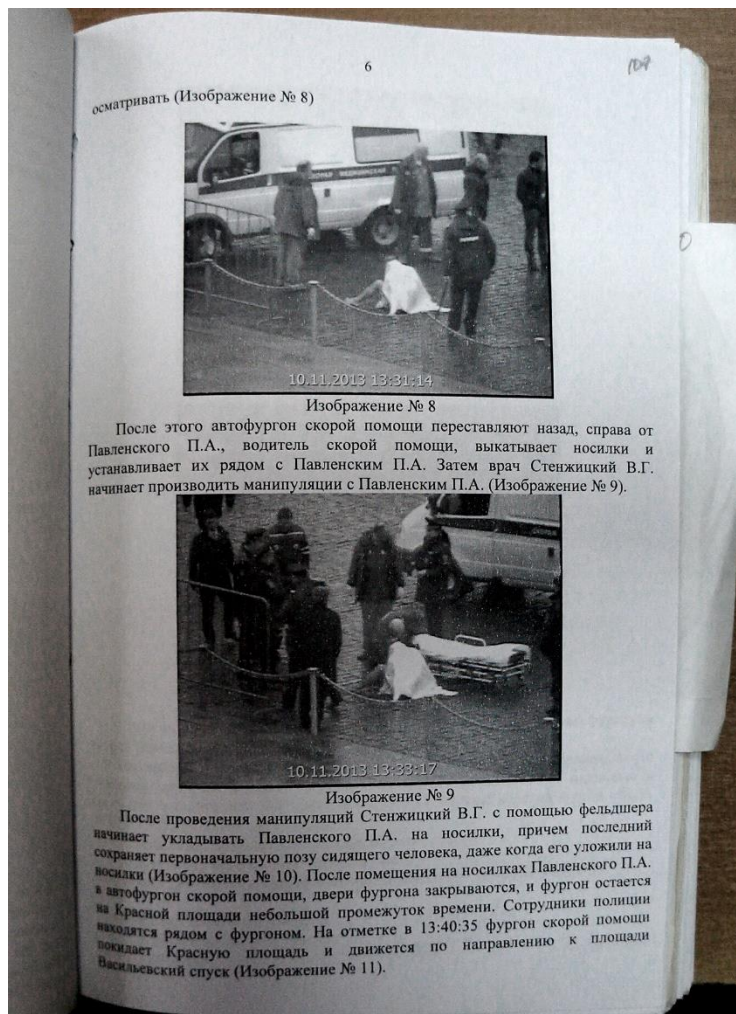


Attachment 9. The centrifugal dynamics. Police documentation of *Fixation*.



Attachment 10. Police documentation of *Fixation*.

Attachment 11. Police documentation of *Fixation*.



Один из врачей, подойдя к молодому человеку, осмотрел его, после чего извлек из земли гвоздь, но оставил ее в кармане молодого человека. Крови не было ни на брусчатке, ни на гвозде, ни на кармане молодого человека. Когда из земли извлекали гвоздь, молодой человек ничего не говорил и не кричал. После того,

Attachment 12. Police report of *Fixation*.

19.10.2014 психиатр, 21.00: Дз: Острое полиморфное психотическое расстройство с аутоагрессивным поведением. Ампутация мочки правой ушной раковины. Учитывая анамнез нельзя исключить обострение эндогенного заболевания. По распоряжению администрации направлен в 32 ОРИТ. По своему психическому состоянию больной может находиться в условиях реанимационного отделения. Рекомендовано: наблюдение за поведением больного, галоперидол 0,5%-1,0 в/мышечно на ночь, при агрессивном поведении - аминазин 2,5%-2мл в/мышечно, под контролем АД, при возбуждении - сибазон 0,5%-2,0 в/мышечно.

Attachment 13. Medical documentation.