

A **ROUTLEDGE** FREEBOOK

# Religion and the Arts



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Introduction 

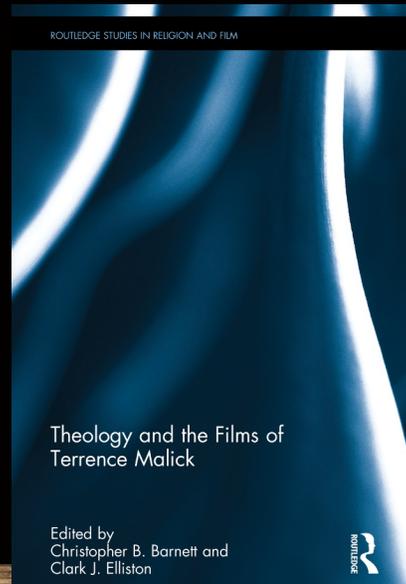
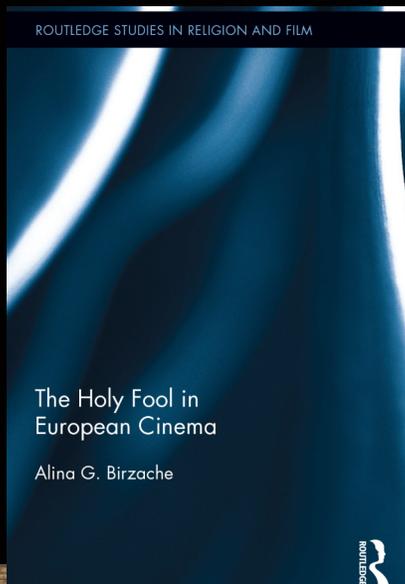
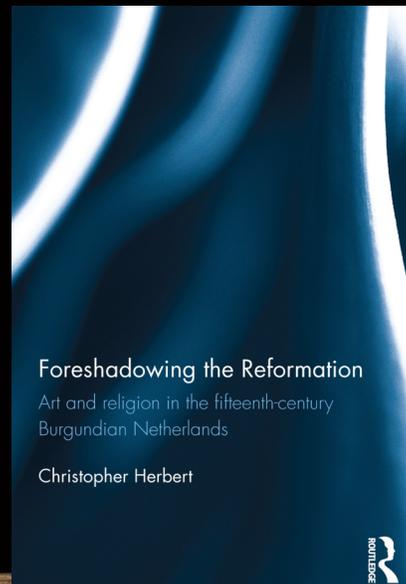
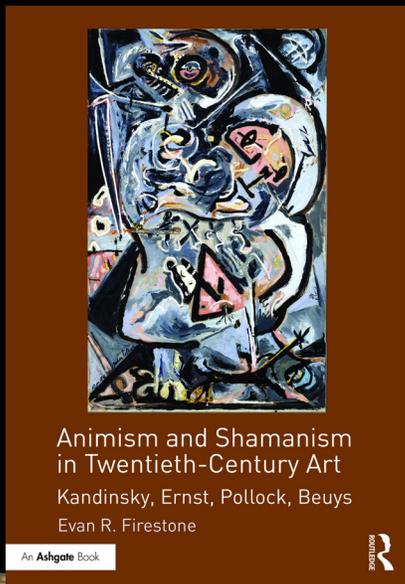
01:: Kandinsky and animism "Everything 'dead'  
trembled' from *Animism and Shamanism in  
Twentieth Century Art* 

02:: Funerary monuments and entombment groups:  
Religion and art in large format from *Foreshadowing  
the Reformation* 

03:: Speaking Truth to Power: The Holy Fool in  
Soviet and Russian Cinema from *The Holy Fool in  
European Cinema* 

04:: An Improbable Career: The Films of Terrence  
Malick from *Theology and the Films of Terrence  
Malick* 

Visit our online collection to discover more



Visit [www.routledge.com](http://www.routledge.com) to order your copy of these titles and get 20% off using discount code **VAN16**. This code is valid until 31st December 2016 and cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.



# Introduction

The chapters selected for this FreeBook represent a selection of our publishing in the field of Religion and the Arts.

Visit our website to view information on the books in full, or to purchase a copy. Links are provided at the beginning of each chapter of this FreeBook. If you have any questions please contact us.

**Note to readers:** References from the original chapters have not been included in this text. For a fully-referenced version of each chapter, including footnotes, bibliographies, references and endnotes, please see the published title. Links to purchase each specific title can be found on the first page of each chapter.

As you read through this FreeBook, you will notice that some excerpts reference previous chapters – please note that these are references to the original text and not the Freebook.

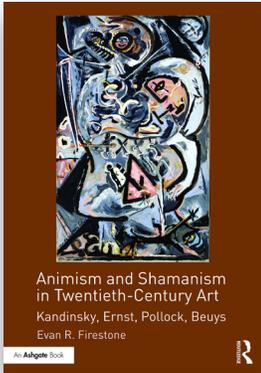


CHAPTER

1

# Kandinsky and animism: "Everything 'dead' trembled"

# 1:: Kandinsky and animism: "Everything 'dead' trembled"



Certain high savage races distinctly hold, and a large proportion of other savage and barbarian races make a more or less close approach to, a theory of separable and surviving souls or spirits belonging to stocks and stones, weapons, boats, food, clothes, ornaments, and other objects which to us are not merely soulless but lifeless.

Edward B. Tylor

The following is excerpted from *Animism and Shamanism in Twentieth-Century Art* by Evan R. Firestone. © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

To purchase a copy, [click here](#).

In 1912 the artists' group *Der Blaue Reiter* (*Blue Rider*) of Munich, led by the Russian Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and his younger colleague Franz Marc, published what they described as a "kind of almanac" (although subsequent issues did not follow) that contained seventeen essays, two "stage compositions" by Kandinsky, and over 150 illustrations of folk and ethnic art, religious paintings and prints, and examples of contemporary work. The folk and ethnic art offered an alternative to the conventional art then being produced, and the religious imagery underscored the need for cultural healing and spiritual renewal. Kandinsky's cover for the almanac depicts the dragon slayer St. George, Russia's patron saint who represents the triumph of Christianity over evil and ignorance. For Kandinsky the dragon symbolized the evil of materialism that had swept over his world, and against which an authentic spiritual art could be enlisted for the ensuing battle.

A few months earlier, he lamented in *On the Spiritual in Art*, first published in late 1911, that:

Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose. The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over. The awakening soul is still deeply under the influence of this nightmare. Only a weak light glimmers, like a tiny point in an enormous circle of blackness.

Nevertheless, the weak light offered hope: "After the period of materialistic trials to which the soul had apparently succumbed, yet which it rejected as an evil temptation, the soul emerges refined by struggle and suffering."

Kandinsky's perception of the world's condition mirrored the pronouncements of Rudolf Steiner, a one-time leader of the German Theosophical Society who founded his own variant of Theosophy in 1912 called Anthroposophy that emphasized the figure of Christ rather than the teachings of Asian Masters. In "The Origin of Suffering," a lecture delivered in Berlin in 1906, Steiner noted that "the materialistic concept of the world penetrates everywhere," with the result that Spirit, in which "all existence has



its origin,” has become rigid. He asserted, “In every material being we see rigidified Spirit. As we need only bring the necessary heat to the ice to turn it into water again, so we need only bring the necessary Spirit to the beings around us to renew the Spirit in them.” The “trials and suffering” that Kandinsky saw as necessary for the soul’s emergence accords with Steiner’s conviction that “Consciousness [the perception of higher states] within matter is ... born out of suffering, out of pain.”

The Theosophical concept of a spiritual core within all matter was not new to Kandinsky as he had previously been exposed to a similar line of thought in Symbolist literature. To the mix of Symbolism and Theosophy that were central to his notion of a soul-resonating universe I would like to propose the animism of indigenous peoples, a lively topic in the late nineteenth century thanks to Tylor. Not only do Symbolism, Theosophy, and animism hold to the idea of internal essences, they all express a belief in a universe of inner sound(s). Peg Weiss in *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* identifies shamanic figures, nature spirits, borrowings from the pictographic imagery on shamans’ drums, and other artifacts of shamanhood – amulets, robes, headdresses, and masks – in numerous works by Kandinsky. However, animistic beliefs extend down from corporeal nature spirits to the smallest and least significant of objects, a world view Kandinsky understood and which pervaded his philosophy and practice of art.

### **Kandinsky and Symbolism**

Symbolism as a movement was formally announced by Jean Moréas in the “Symbolist Manifesto” published in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1886. In it he maintains that external appearances veil inner meanings, what in Idealist terms he calls “Ideas.” Seen in this way the material world becomes a source of revelation:

The essential character of Symbolist art consists in never trying to reproduce the idea in itself. In this art form, therefore, depictions of nature, human actions, indeed all concrete phenomena should not show themselves as such: they are outward forms, whose purpose is to represent their hidden affinities with primordial ideas.

Similarly, the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé questioned the purpose of language in dealing with “a fact of nature ... if [it is] not to extract from it, distancing the object from the direct and palpable, the pure notion that lies within.” According to the critic G-Albert Aurier, a work has a “double soul (soul of the artist and soul of nature).” The artist leads the way in apprehending the unseen: “it is mysticism alone that can save our society from brutalization, sensualism and utilitarianism. The most noble faculties of our soul are in the process of atrophying ... we must recultivate in ourselves the superior qualities of the soul.” Aurier claimed that the true artist “know[s] how to read



in every object its abstract significance, the primordial idea that goes beyond it ... knows how to use objects ... to express the ideas in which he has insight.” French Symbolist theory soon spread to Belgium, Russia, and Germany, and would reverberate, by way of Russian literature, in Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*. The aversion to materialism and other aspects of modern life led Russian Symbolists to find alternatives in mysticism and “purer” cultures. In an essay titled “The Poetry of Magic and Spells” published in 1908, the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok declared that “Ancient spells, and with them the whole realm of folk magic and rituals, are for us an ore in which the gold of authentic poetry glints.” This, in part, explains Kandinsky’s expression of “feeling for the primitives ... [who] capture in their works the inner essence of things.”

In his 1890 essay “The General Meaning of Art” the Russian philosopher and poet Vladimir Solovyov claimed that “absolute beauty,” or in other words, the “internal and external meaning of life,” can be discovered within the world’s visible matter. He argued in “On Lyric Poetry” published in the same year that pure lyric poetry is an expression of the spiritual, unencumbered by material reality. Writing about the poetry of Konstantin Balmont, the critic Valery Bryusov found that:

Unexpected and marvelous possibilities are revealed to mankind. Something that seemed during the ages as dead matter begins to live in the depth of our souls. As if some windows have closed in our life, but other, unknown windows have opened ... “I am able to see beyond the boundaries, and I know the bottomless myself,” Balmont says.

According to Igor Aronov, Kandinsky would have known Solovyov’s important essays and he owned a collection of Balmont’s poetry. He also was personally acquainted with and collected the writings of Dmitry Merezhkovsky, a writer, religious thinker, and literary critic who advocated “the need for mysticism” in the face of “radical materialism,” and foresaw an approaching epoch of “divine idealism.” The Russian Symbolists heard the sounds of Spirit within matter that Kandinsky often described in his own writings. Afanasy Fet envisioned the spiritual world as a realm “where the word is dumb, where sounds reign, where you hear not the song, but the soul of the singer.” The poet and theorist Vyacheslav Ivanov declared that “I am not a Symbolist if my words ... are not the echo of other sounds about which you know nothing, as about the Spirit, where they come from and where they go – and if they do not arouse the echo in the labyrinths of souls.” As Kandinsky stated several times, “the world sounds.”

The Belgium playwright Maurice Maeterlinck was much admired by the Russian Symbolists, including the aforementioned Bryusov and Ivanov. Articles about him and extracts of his plays frequently were published in Russia, notably in the Symbolist journal *Vesy* edited by Bryusov, who supplied translations of his work. Maeterlinck also enjoyed acclaim in Germany, where in 1906 Kandinsky went to study art (in Munich)



after completing law studies at Moscow University four years earlier. In Maeterlinck's 1896 collection of essays, *Le Trésor des Humbles* (*The Treasure of the Humble*), which was translated to German two years later, "The Awakening of the Soul" hopefully suggests that "[a] spiritual epoch is perhaps upon us," and "our soul bestirs itself." He senses that "signs of a life we cannot explain are everywhere, vibrating by the side of everyday life," and "spiritual phenomena manifest themselves – mysterious, direct workings, that bring soul nearer to soul," sentiments with which Kandinsky could fully concur.

Maeterlinck's plays were performed in Germany up to the First World War – for example, *Pélleas and Mellisande* and *The Blue Bird*, respectively in Munich and Berlin in 1908–9 and 1912 – at which point Maeterlinck denounced German militarism and Kandinsky returned to Russia. The latter's enthusiasm for the Belgian writer is evident in *On the Spiritual in Art*:

Maeterlinck's principal means is his use of words.

Words are inner sounds. This inner sound arises partly – perhaps principally – from the object for which the word serves as a name. But when the object itself is not seen, but only its name is heard, an abstract conception arises in the mind of the listener, a dematerialized object that at once conjures up a vibration in the "heart" ... Skillful use of a word (according to poetic feeling) – an internally necessary repetition of the same word twice, three times, many times – can lead not only to the growth of inner sound, but also bring to light still other, unrealized spiritual qualities of the word ... this pure sound comes to the fore and exercises a direct influence upon the soul.

Kandinsky's analysis of Maeterlinck's use of words reflects a typical understanding of Symbolist literature by writers and theorists of the period. Towards the end of his treatise he calls Maeterlinck "one of the first spiritual composers of the art of today, out of which the art of tomorrow will be born."

According to Peg Weiss, Kandinsky's Symbolist associations in Munich included the Stefan George circle and the Artists' Theatre, founded in 1908 by George Fuchs. George, who called for a new *geistige kunst*, a spiritual art, had met Mallarmé and Moréas in Paris and attended the former's salons. By the turn of the century many literary figures considered him to be "a savior of German poetry." The George circle of writers, artists, and intellectuals congregated in the home of Karl Wolfskehl, where the poet stayed when he was in town. On good evidence, Weiss establishes Kandinsky's friendship with Wolfskehl and his wife, which she believes may have begun as early as 1903–4. She also links him to Fuchs's Munich Artists' Theater by a chain of associations and parallels of thought, comparing the director's philosophy of "nonnaturalistic symbolic theatre" with Kandinsky's stage composition *Yellow Sound*, which she describes as "a miniature compendium of ideas and elements integral to the Artists' Theatre," although she is unable to make an absolute connection. In this period Kandinsky

became aware of Steiner's Theosophical ideas when he attended the clairvoyant's lectures in Berlin in the winter of 1907–8, purchased his *Theosophy: An Introduction to Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man*, and a complete set of the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* that contains his essays.

### **Picturing shamanism**

Kandinsky's knowledge of the indigenous peoples of northern Russia and Siberia was initially acquired at Moscow University. His study of law included the field of customary law, one of the most important topics of ethnographic research in the 1880s. Consequently, he was drawn to the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology, the leading center in Russia for such studies. At the university and the Ethnographic Society, a section of the Russian Imperial Society of Friends of Natural History, Anthropology, and Ethnography, Kandinsky met the foremost scholars of the day, and developed friendships with students who would become prominent. Funding of his proposal to the Ethnographic Society to do field work among the Zyrians (now known as the Komi), a Finno-Ugric tribe west of the Urals, took him on an arduous journey to Vologda province in 1889. On his return he published a nine page paper on Zyrian deities titled "Materials on the Ethnography of the Sysol- and Vychegda-Zyrians: The National Deities (According to Contemporary Beliefs)" in the society's journal. He also contributed seven book reviews to the journal in 1889 and 1890.<sup>18</sup> After his university education Kandinsky retained an active interest in ethnography, which is clearly visible in his art. In 1930 he wrote, "My original enthusiasm for ethnography dates right back to my student days at Moscow University, when I noticed, albeit somewhat unconsciously, that ethnography was just as much an art as a science."

Weiss believes that within a few years of arriving in Munich, images of deities, shamans, and nature spirits appear in what are known as Kandinsky's "Russian paintings," the major example of which is *Motley Life* of 1907 (Figure 1.1). The painting presents an old man front and center with a long green beard and a staff, who Weiss suggests may be an "old sorcerer" or shaman. According to her, the mother and child to his right may be the legendary Zlata Baba, or "Golden Woman," and her son Numi-Tórem, called the "Golden Prince," the highest God of the Ostiaks and Voguls, also known among northern tribes as World-Watching Man. A monastery on top of a large hill in the background, one of several Christian elements in the painting, including the dual role of the mother and child as Mary and the Christ child, makes it the major example of Kandinsky's early concern with the theme of dvoeverie, or double faith. Kandinsky scholars Carol McKay and Rose-Carol Washton Long find Weiss's interpretation "extremely pertinent" and "convincing," whereas Aronov "calls Weiss's whole conception into question." Although a number of her shamanic interpretations have been challenged, she leaves little doubt as to Kandinsky's preoccupation with shamanism.

Several pictures that make her point are summarized below as an introduction to animism's interrelationships with Theosophical ideas about Spirit, and the role it



*Figure 1.1* Wassily Kandinsky, *Motley Life*, 130 × 162.5 cm, tempera on canvas, 1907. On permanent loan from the Bayerische Landesbank, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus and Kunstbau, Munich. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

played in his art and thought.

According to Weiss, as Kandinsky's style transitioned to the one we associate with him prior to the First World War, he painted a major work that refers to characters important to the Zyrians, which survives in the form of a study, *Sketch for Composition II*, 1909–10 (Figure. 1.2). Kandinsky's field work led him to conclude that the Zyrians only had the vaguest concept of an immaterial soul. The spirits they reported to him were corporeal and more or less anthropomorphic. In his article Kandinsky states,

Even today the Zyrians are possessed of a completely unclear conception of spirit, and undoubtedly they can thank the process of Russification and

Christianization for this. All their Forest and Water Deities, etc., have a substantial form. All these beings can be seen and they can incur physical injury. Even their concepts of the human soul are extraordinarily unclear, or are entirely absent.



Figure 1.2 Wassily Kandinsky, *Sketch for Composition II*, 97.5 × 131.2 cm, oil on canvas, 1909–10. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Photo credit: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Art Resource, N.Y. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Weiss identifies the green figure in the left foreground, who reclines on the shoreline alongside waves that threaten several figures as Vasa, the malevolent water spirit responsible for tempests and drownings who was “often imagined as clad in a green robe.” In the upper right quadrant under a drooping tree may be the prone figure of a deceased shaman attended by mourners. Weiss likens the nearby brown figure with arm raised over his tiny head to the demonic forest spirit Vörsa, described by Kandinsky in his expedition diary as having “kidnapped a boy. Was seen last year. Seized a horse, strangled [it]. One has to cross oneself. It’s as big as a tree and brown-black. Lifts up its right hand.” In the painting, however, the figure raises its left arm. In the upper left quadrant the small golden figure in a boat is World-Watching Man, his outstretched arms demonstrated by Weiss to be an identifying trait. The horsemen in the center may represent Florus and Laurus, the patron saints of horses, to whom northern Russians prayed for cures. Their presence in the painting is another



instance of *dvoeverie*, and suggests to Weiss “an alliance with shamanic powers, as they appear to ‘ascend’ the ‘cosmic tree’ or pillar rising in the center of the picture.”

From about 1911 Kandinsky’s increasingly abstract paintings, in which line is freed from the obligation of contour, reflect the influence of pictographic markings on shamans’ drums. Unbounded by drawn contours, colors float in space amongst animated lines flying off in all directions. A watercolor, *In the Circle* (1911–13), even incorporates the rim of a drum that frames nearly all the elements of the painting (Figure 1.3). Weiss observes that Siberian and Lapp drums had been abundantly illustrated in travel and ethnographic literature for centuries, and examples were plentiful in Russian and German museums. Images on drums included stick-figures of men and deities, simplified representations of animals, trees and mountains, suns, moons and stars, ladders to the beyond, rainbows and zig-zag “sacred paths,” in other words, a microcosm of the shaman’s universe. Kandinsky further reduced most of these pictographs, but Weiss has been able to decode some of the marks. For example, she finds a conspicuous similarity between stylized horses on an Altaic drum illustrated in a four-volume work well known to Kandinsky, G. N. Potanin’s *Studies of North-western Siberia* (1881–83), and the hooked lines just left of center in *In the Circle*. These hieroglyphic lines in Kandinsky’s imagery came to represent riders on horseback. Weiss also notes that “Round suns and moons proliferate ... [and] the segmented sections along the edge of Kandinsky’s circle are reminiscent of similar motifs found on Lapp shaman drums.”

Shamanic imagery interested Kandinsky because it represented a spiritualized conception of life close to nature that was antithetical to the early twentieth-century world in which he found himself. However, as his paintings became more abstract his subject matter and symbolism were probably only accessible to his immediate artistic circle. Nevertheless, Kandinsky conceived of a larger audience of sympathetic viewers who did not have to decipher his images, but would effortlessly absorb their spiritual essences. In *On the Spiritual in Art* he stated that there is:

the hidden type [of construction] that emerges unnoticed from the picture and thus is less suited to the eye than the soul.

This hidden construction can consist of forms apparently scattered at random upon the canvas ... the external absence of any such relationship here contributes to its internal presence. What externally has been loosened has internally been fused into a single unity.

*In the Circle*, with its scattered, seemingly random marks and colors, painted about the time Kandinsky was completing *On the Spiritual in Art*, amply illustrates the passage above. Not only does he maintain that the disparate elements have an underlying spiritual unity, he believed, as he often stated, that signs such as the horse

hieroglyphics, and even ordinary lines, have a spiritual resonance that registers in the



*Figure 1.3* Wassily Kandinsky, *In the Circle*, 48.9 × 48.5 cm, watercolor, gouache, and ink on sepia paper mounted on cardboard, 1911–13. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Photo credit: © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

soul of the beholder. This notion has something in common with what Carl Jung would later identify as “buried archetypes of the collective unconscious” that arise “from the hidden depths of the psyche.”

As the shaman repetitively beat the drum he fell into a trance, leaving his physical body, and with the assistance of his spirit helpers traveled to other worlds to recover the souls of sick persons, escort the souls of the deceased to the afterlife, and





to communicate with spirits about earthly concerns. The shaman in some tribes, according to Weiss, made the journey “by means of his drum, which during his trance became his magical horse.” Eliade states that the Buryat and Yakut drum was called the “shaman’s horse,” and the former utilized horse hide to represent that animal. Notable paintings by Kandinsky in the 1920s of the rider on a galloping horse and the circle as drum motif include *In the Black Square*, 1923 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) and *Black Accompaniment*, 1924 (private collection, Lausanne, Switzerland). The conjunction of rider and circle suggests the conflation of the shaman and St. George and his shield. This conflation also appears to include World-Watching Man, whose iconography as an equestrian figure is borne out by the “sacred spreads” (blankets) once found in Vogul houses that depicted him with outstretched arms on horseback.

A barely distinguishable rider on a galloping horse looms above a tiny couple in a deep gorge in *Improvisation Klamm*, 1914 (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich). Kandinsky painted it a month before the outbreak of World War I following a visit with his mistress, the artist Gabriele Münter, to Höllentalklamm (Hell’s Valley Gorge) in the Bavarian Alps. A metaphorical ladder leads the eye down to the couple dressed in traditional Bavarian attire who stand on a boat dock near a waterfall. Bright colors, active shapes, strong contrasts, and thrusting diagonals are meant to convey the external and internal sounds Kandinsky heard in the gorge and the psychological effects he experienced. Musical terms for his titles – Improvisations, Compositions, Fugues – emphasize the auditory vibrations Kandinsky believed his pictures transmit. The equestrian figure may not be, or may be more than, St. George or World-Watching Man. On the basis of a sketch for *Improvisation Klamm* Weiss concludes that the horseman apparently represents one of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse. Inundated by the multitude of visual elements that weigh down on the couple the image has something of an apocalyptic character like other paintings at this time, such as *Composition VI*, 1913 (Hermitage, St. Petersburg), whose subject is the Deluge. As Kandinsky noted, spiritual rebirth will follow trial and suffering. Whatever else the rider may be, he also is the harbinger of a higher reality to come.

War in Europe forced Kandinsky to return to Moscow where he worked fitfully in his studio for several years. An important work of 1919, *In the Grey*, one of the last in his late-Munich style, is based on a Buryat legend that accounts for the progressive deterioration of shamanic powers over time (Figure 1.4). One version of the legend was related by Viktor M. Mikhailovskii, a Siberian specialist at Moscow University and vice-president of the Ethnographic Society when Kandinsky was a student. He and his former student also served together on the board of the *Ethnographic Review*. As Mikhailovskii tells the tale, the first shaman, Khara Gyrgen had unlimited power, but he was put to the test:

God, desiring to prove him, took the soul of a certain rich maiden, and she fell

ill. The shaman flew through the sky on his tambourine seeking the soul and saw it in a bottle on God's table. To keep the soul from flying out, God corked up the bottle with one of the fingers on his right hand. The cunning shaman changed himself into a yellow spider, and bit God on the right cheek, so that,



*Figure 1.4* Wassily Kandinsky, *In the Grey*, 129 x 176 cm, oil on canvas, 1919. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Photo credit: © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMS-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

irritated by the pain, he clapped his right hand to his face and let the soul out of the bottle. Enraged at this, God limited Khara Gyrgen's power and thenceforth shamans have been getting worse and worse.

Another version of the legend has Khara Gyrgen sting God in the form of a wasp, which Weiss identifies as the elongated, winged, black and yellow-striped insect right of center. God's bent finger is located at the top of the painting on the right side. The bottle is pictured in two positions, tipping in the upper left quadrant, and in the vicinity of the center spilling its contents toward the lower right corner. Kandinsky shows the maiden escaping below God's finger, both as a colorful multi-striped bird and a butterfly. The Buryat shaman is represented in triplicate, suggesting movement through space, riding on the back of a fish, more or less where the label would be on the tilted bottle. This

detail is ethnographically interesting because it is the Sami shaman, not his Buryat counterpart, who rides on the back of a magic fish, or alternatively, can change himself into a fish during the shamanic séance. Other details include three rowers in a boat below the fallen bottle, a motif associated with the travels of World-Watching Man, and three hooked lines to the right of the boat signifying horses and riders. In the Grey, chock full of shamanic references, remained in Kandinsky's possession throughout his lifetime, indicating the special significance he attached to it.

The geometric abstraction of Kandinsky's oval "drum paintings" created between 1925 and 1928 – Sami and most Siberian drums are oval – reflect the stylistic shift that began to emerge with his exposure to the Russian Constructivists, and which became the rule after 1922 when he joined the faculty of the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany. The Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1927 and was closed by the Nazis in 1933, at which point Kandinsky went to Paris. In Paris, new rhythms and biomorphic shapes, perhaps influenced by the Surrealists, are evident in the 1936 painting *Dominant Curve* (Figure 1.5). Two elements that immediately register are the broad, multi-colored band facing left that approximates a human in seated position, and the large yellow disk; then a horse with galloping legs and four heads comes into view. Weiss identifies the colorful band as a shamanic robe hung with amulets, and the yellow circle as the sun



Figure 1.5 Wassily Kandinsky, *Dominant Curve*, 129.2 × 194.3 cm, oil on canvas, 1936. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Photo credit: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Art Resource, NY. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





disk of St. George, who as early as 1911 in a reverse painting on glass, *All Saints I* (Städtliche Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich), is depicted with a shield emblazoned with the sun. The multiple heads of the horse with flying manes suggest the furious movement of the animal's ascension into space, denoted by the flight of steps on the right side of the painting. The amulets on the frock, intended to serve and protect the shaman, include disks, snakes, and according to Weiss, bird forms, ribs, and a jagged, four-pronged shape that may represent a bear's claw. Various disks on shaman robes symbolized the sun, moon, and stars; snakes were considered magical animals, birds signified shamanic flight, and bears throughout much of Siberia were believed to be powerful helping spirits. Several rib-like shapes on the robe allude to the iron bones and skeletons worn on shamanic costumes that indicated the wearer had died and returned to life in dreams or hallucinations during initiation rites. The striped, multi-colored robe may refer to the "pieces of many-coloured stuff" stitched onto the Altaic shaman's frock mentioned by M. A. Czaplicka in 1914, and later described by Eliade as "[a] quantity of ribbons and kerchiefs." The three black circles with round, hole-like centers at the upper right may be the so-called "ice hole" disks that were sewn on the shaman's robe to symbolize the opening of the earth through which he descends to the underworld. In the upper left a cartouche contains an abstracted figure that leads Weiss to conclude that the artist has put himself into the picture as a dancing shaman.

### **Tylor and Steiner: The spirits and souls of things**

In paintings such as *In the Grey* and *Dominant Curve* Kandinsky suggests a swarming, animated universe. Other than corporeal spirits, Weiss puts little stress on the vital, animistic character of Kandinsky's work, and her few generalized statements about him "animating the canvas" are not pursued for their broader implications. Animism as we know the term today was defined by Tylor in *Primitive Culture* to which he allocated seven chapters. Much of his *magnum opus* is devoted to human souls, deities, and higher forms in the spirit world, but he provides numerous examples of indigenous peoples who attribute souls to animals and plants as well as to objects that appear completely lifeless. He wrote,

Among races within the limits of savagery, the general doctrine of souls is found worked out with remarkable breadth and consistency. The souls of animals are recognized by a natural extension from the theory of human souls; the souls of trees and plants follow in some vague partial way; and the souls of inanimate objects expand the general category to its extremist boundary.

In point of fact, some indigenous societies consider living and inanimate things to be



inhabited by species-specific corporeal spirits, while others, as Tylor suggests, believe that such objects have immaterial souls. The distinction between spirits and souls, however, is often ambiguous in these cultures.

*Primitive Culture* was almost immediately translated into Russian (1872) and German (1873), the languages in which the leading research on Eurasian shamanism was conducted in the late nineteenth century. The two-volume book was required reading for anyone with a serious interest in ethnography. Furthermore, the model for the Russian fieldwork manual was the British program *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* that contained Tylor's instructions on how to gather material. By the time of his death in 1917, Tylor had become known as "the Father of Anthropology," a title so often invoked up to the present day that it is commonplace. His interest in the comparative study of the larger patterns of primitive cultures, rather than the ethnographic description and classification of particular groups, led his German-born colleague, Max Müller, Professor of Philology at Oxford University, to call anthropology "Mr. Tylor's science." His work was not only familiar to students of ethnography, but it cut across several disciplines so that the British anthropologist, Alfred C. Haddon, could write in 1910 that he had "profoundly influenced modern thought." Kandinsky certainly would have been fascinated with the ethnographic material in Tylor's book, but he also would have been struck by his statement that "the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings ... embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy." Tylor concluded the first volume of *Primitive Culture* with this sentence: "The divisions which have separated the great religions of the world into intolerant and hostile sects are for the most part superficial in comparison with the deepest of all religious schisms, that which divides Animism from Materialism." The contest between spirituality and materialism provides a convenient segue to Rudolf Steiner's views about the spiritual world.

In a lecture delivered in 1922 in which Steiner spoke of the "living, spiritual power" of nature he expressed sympathy with the animistic beliefs of Tylor's "lower races":

Much is said today about so-called Animism, the poetic fancy of simple and primitive peoples, in an endeavor to explain the experiences of the past ages as recorded and handed down in tradition. But by facing up to realities we see that it was not in a kind of poetic fancy that ancient man described the woods and forests, lakes and mountains, springs, brooks, clouds and thunder and lightning, and everything physical in the world of Nature in a spiritual way. He saw ... the spiritual beings that inhabited every flower and mineral, every spring and wood ... Ancient man experienced in himself something that was living; he was able to experience and to know the spiritual beings in the world and to recognize them as the same thing that had lived within him before he entered into



physical life ... he did not feel that this thought proceeded from the organism of his physical body, for he knew it was a living thing he had brought with him from the spiritual world before his birth.

Steiner could identify with the animism of indigenous peoples because his writings are filled with related ideas.

Theosophists, in fact, believe in a universe of spirits drawn from Eastern cosmologies, and Steiner advanced an elaborate system beginning with nature spirits above which are the spirits of three “Higher Hierarchies” that are perceptible by occult vision. Few succeed in mastering the cosmic development necessary to ascend these hierarchies, but modern man, according to Steiner, can perceive the spiritual in nature by accessing the spiritual within himself through a regimen of demanding spiritual exercises. As early as 1901 he wrote,

With the awakening of myself there takes place a spiritual rebirth of the things in this world ... There outside stands a tree. I take it into my mind. I throw my inner light upon what I have apprehended. Within me the tree becomes more than it is outside ... Now the tree is no longer the isolated being which is in external space. It becomes part of the whole spiritual world within me.

In other words, “things that previously were only corporeal phenomena reveal their soul and spirit qualities to anyone who is awakened in soul and spirit.” Steiner does not say whether the tree has an inner voice, but on another occasion he stated that,

the essentially spiritual in things is a resounding ... This inner sounding which, of course, is not at all a sound perceptible to the outer physical ear, this inner word through which things can express their own nature is an experience that man has when he becomes ... a real student of the great Initiates.

This is a spiritual state possessed by indigenous peoples and in larger measure by their shamans.

An individual can connect to the soul of things because his soul is part of what Steiner called the “soul world.” He distinguishes between the corporeal and soul worlds by “say[ing] that the soul world in all objects and entities is much finer, more mobile and plastic than the former.” At times it may seem as if Steiner is speaking about the souls of individual things, but he is actually referring to an all-embracing unity, an Over-Soul that pervades everything in the universe. Reading Steiner, Kandinsky may have been reminded of Potanin’s dismissal of the seemingly polytheistic character of southern Siberian and Mongol shamanism. He argued that “the names of all spirits were related to one mythological character, ‘Erke,’ whose image simply became dissolved in nature and encompassed the universe.” At any rate, although comparisons between animism and Anthroposophy should not be drawn too closely – Steiner



regarded the former as “atavistic clairvoyance” as opposed to “supersensible knowledge” gained through disciplined training – Kandinsky would have seen the connections.

### **Kandinsky and Eurasian animism**

Steiner’s apperception of a tree by which its “soul and spirit qualities” are revealed to him, thereby merging him into the whole of spiritual existence, resembles the conviction of many indigenous peoples that trees and plants have souls, in some cases a result of the transmigration of human souls. In 1927, A. N. Gren reported that the Zyrians specifically identified trees as the repositories of human souls. In general, Finno-Ugric tribes regarded the forest and its individual trees as possessing souls (ört). According to Uno Holmberg, the distinguished Finnish ethnographer (who later changed his surname to Harva), the Cheremiss (Mari), neighbors of the Zyrians, believed that “while the soul is in the tree, it is glad and it prospers, but when the ‘soul’ moves away, the tree withers.” The same was thought of water, which becomes fouled when its soul departs. The Altaic peoples in Central Asia also subscribed to the idea that a tree dies when its soul (*kut*) leaves it. As Tylor remarked, “Plants, partaking with animals the phenomena of life and death, health and sickness, not unnaturally have some kind of soul ascribed to them.” Throughout Eurasia not only trees and water but even the earth itself was believed to possess a soul. It follows that the earth would have a soul because the living things it nurtures and its physical features have souls.

The great Finnish linguist/ethnologist M. Alexander Castrén discussed the phenomenon of species-specific spirits in *Vorlesungen über die Finnische Mythologie* (*Lectures on Finnish Mythology*), 1853, a work with which Kandinsky was familiar. Tylor, who frequently quoted Castrén, summarized him at length on this matter:

The doctrine of such species-deities is perhaps nowhere more definitely stated than by Castrén in his “Finnish Mythology.” In his description of the Siberian nature-worship, the lowest level is exemplified by the Samoyeds, whose direct worship of natural objects for themselves may perhaps indicate the original religious condition of the whole Turanian race [Uralic-Altaic peoples]. But the doctrine of the comparatively cultured heathen Finns was at a different stage. Here every object in nature has a “haltia,” a guardian deity or genius, a being which was its creator and thenceforth became attached to it. These deities or genii are, however, not bound to each single transitory object, but are free personal beings which have movement, form, body, and soul. Their existence in no wise depends on the existence of the individual objects, for although no object in nature is without its guardian deity, this deity extends to the whole race or species. This ash-tree, this stone, this house, has indeed its particular



“hatlia,” yet these same “haltiat” concern themselves with other ash-trees, stones, and houses, of which the individuals may perish, but their presiding genii live on in the species.

Castrén took his field work as far as Central Asia, but he spent a lot of time west of the Urals in and around Zyrian territories. Weiss suggests that Kandinsky read Castrén in preparation for his field work in Vologda province.

In a category entirely different from the spirits or souls of living entities are what Tylor calls object-souls of things that were never alive. One explanation for them is that their existence insures that objects belonging to a person in life will be transferred with him to the hereafter. Holmberg noted that in the region inhabited by the Zyrians the idea that object-souls carry artifacts to the dead was typical:

According to the belief of the Finno-Ugrians, the very smallest things have a “soul.” This explains the custom of breaking objects intended for the dead, such as wooden spoons and bowls, clay pots, and the like “so that the departed may take them with him to the invisible world.” Doubtless this reflects the concept that even things have an invisible part which is separated from the visible by being broken; in other words, an object must be deprived of its life in order that its “soul” may leave it.

This does not explain why objects other than utensils, such as stones, should have a soul. Tylor reasoned that there is a natural human tendency to think of all things in human terms, and insofar as the notion of a human soul is deeply ingrained, primitive peoples infer that a stone also must have a soul.

In northeastern Siberia, a Chukchee shaman poetically described his world of spirits and object-souls to Waldemar Bogoras, who first published the shaman’s words in Russian in 1900. Kandinsky, who closely followed developments in Russia, and was in contact with many people, likely would have been aware of this publication in an area of great interest to him. The shaman said,

On the steep bank of a river there exists life. A voice is there, and speaks aloud. I saw the “master” of the voice and spoke with him. He subjected himself to me and sacrificed to me. He came yesterday and answered my questions. The small gray bird with the blue breast sings shaman-songs in the hollow of the bough, calls her spirits, and practices shamanism. The wood-pecker strikes his drum in the tree with his drumming nose. Under the axe the tree trembles and wails as a drum under the baton. All these come at my call.

All that exists lives. The lamp walks around. The walls of the house have voices of their own. Even the chamber-vessel has a separate land and house. The skins sleeping in the bags talk at night. The antlers lying on the

tombs arise at night and walk in procession around the mounds, while the deceased get up and visit the living.

In an endnote Weiss compares part of this statement with one made by Kandinsky in his “Rückblicke” (“Reminiscences”) published in 1913, noting that they are “eerily” similar. Kandinsky describes the moment of his epiphany about the direction of his art, again only part of which Weiss quotes:

I became liberated, and new values were revealed. Everything “dead” trembled. Everything showed me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul, inclined more often to silence than to speech – not only the stars, moon, woods, flowers, of which poets sing, but even a cigar butt lying in the ashtray, a patient white trouser-button looking up at you from a puddle on the street, a submissive piece of bark carried through the long grass in the ant’s strong jaws to some uncertain and vital end, the page of a calendar, torn forcibly by one’s consciously outstretched hand from the warm companionship of the block of remaining pages. Likewise, every still and every moving point (= line) became for me just as alive and revealed to me its soul. This was enough for me to “comprehend,” with my entire being and with all my senses, the possibility and existence of the art which today is called “abstract,” as opposed to objective.”

The shaman says, “All these come at my call ... All that exists lives.” Kandinsky declares, “Everything ‘dead’ trembled. Everything showed me its face.” By radically abridging and consigning the statements above to a single endnote Weiss minimizes the importance of animism in Kandinsky’s thinking about art. Her incidental treatment of animism, especially the non-corporeal variety, may be understandable because shamanic elements are readily identifiable in Kandinsky’s work whereas the former is a completely abstract concept.

### **The sounds of things**

Kandinsky declared in his essay “On the Question of Form” published in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, “The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually affective beings. Thus, dead matter is living spirit.” Dead matter becoming living spirit sounds a lot like Bryusov’s claim that in Balmont’s poetry, “dead matter begins to live in the depths of our souls.” In the almanac, Kandinsky’s *Yellow Sound* opens with a chorus of voices uttering these words:

*Stone-hard dreams ... And speaking rocks ...*

*Clods of earth pregnant with puzzling questions ...*

*The heaven turns ... The stones ... melt ...*



*Growing up more invisible ... rampart ...*

He presents his audience with an animated and fraught universe. By “stone-hard dreams” he alludes to the reality of dreams, an explanation Tylor gave for the origin of animism. The coming and going of phantoms in the dreams of primitive peoples, including those of deceased persons, confirmed for them a universe of souls. In “Still?,” a prose poem in Kandinsky’s book *Klänge (Sounds)*, a collection of woodcuts and poems published in 1912, the speaking rocks speak for themselves as object-souls. So do the “speaking windows,” “speaking gold,” and “soulful mortar.” In “On the Question of Form,” written about the same time as the poems in *Klänge*, he again conjoins inner sound with spirit or soul: “Sound is thus the soul of form, form that can have life only by virtue of this sound and that produces its effect upon the external world from within.” With the coming of a new spiritual epoch, he says, “we have begun to sense the spirit, the inner sound within every object.” Kandinsky said of his poems, “I treat the word, the sentence in a very similar way to that in which I treat the line, the spot,” and he advised, “Read my texts without looking for an explicit narrative. Just let them work on your feeling, on your soul.” Although his words, as in the poem “Still?,” attribute sounds to objects, he suggests he was more concerned with the sounds of words than their meanings.

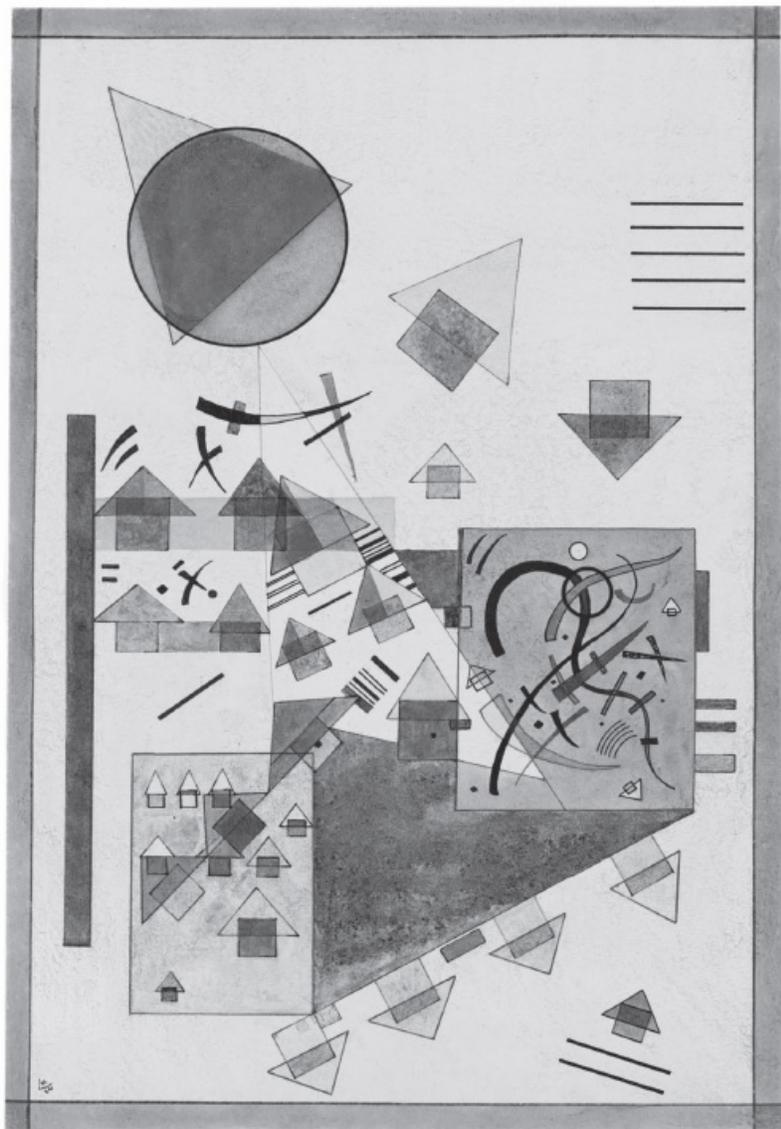
Between 1908 and 1914 Kandinsky created three stage compositions, *Green Sound*, the aforementioned *Yellow Sound*, and *Violet Sound*. *Yellow Sound* survived in its entirety, *Violet Sound* is only documented by one act. He also painted *White Sound* (private collection) in 1908 that represents three figures (the one on the right perhaps holds a child) in a clearing, behind whom a large, whitish ovoid is suspended in front of a wooded landscape. The painting was done in Berlin where Kandinsky and Münter spent several months in 1907–8, during which time he attended Steiner’s lectures and purchased Theosophical literature. The looming white mass gives the picture a decidedly mystical quality, reinforced by haloes around the heads of two figures. Steiner’s lecture, “The Inner Development of Man,” presented and published in Berlin in 1904, describes the path to enlightenment, and helps explain *White Sound*:

The world will radiate in a new light. New sounds and worlds will become audible. This new light and radiance ray toward him [the initiate] from the soul realm. It is characteristic of the soul world that one “sees” it. It is equally characteristic of the spirit world that one “hears” it.

Kandinsky may not have read this passage, but he would have encountered similar ideas in Steiner’s other publications.

In regard to *Yellow Sound*, in which a yellow light in Scene 3 “gradually becomes more intense, until the whole stage is a bright lemon yellow,” Kandinsky wrote to the composer Thomas de Hartmann that it is “a very important moment: yellow intensifies

and everything else vanishes. I can hear woodwind instruments here.” He describes an effect of the neurological phenomenon known as synesthesia in which one kind of sensory stimulation evokes another, a concept that intrigued many artists and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether Kandinsky was a synesthete is debatable, but he recalled his response to a performance of Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* in Moscow as synesthetic: “I saw all my colors in spirit, before my eyes. Wild almost crazy lines were sketched in front of me.” In *On the Spiritual in Art* he wrote, “our hearing of colors is so precise that it would perhaps be impossible to find anyone who would



*Figure 1.6* Wassily Kandinsky, *Double Brown Sound (Brauner Doppelklang)*, 48.5 × 33.3 cm watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper, November–December 1924. The Hilla and Paul Amirault Foundation, on extended loan to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



try to represent his impression of bright yellow by means of the bottom register of the piano, or describe dark madder as being like a soprano voice.” Although *Yellow Sound* opens with an animistic verse, the yellow sound of the title is something other than a reference to animism, as is the case with the painting *White Sound*.

On the other hand, although a watercolor executed at the Bauhaus in 1924, *Brown Double Sound*, has a synesthetic title, it also has animistic implications (Figure 1.6). In much of the composition, numerous arrows comprised of triangles on square bases resemble houses anchored by or enclosed in geometric shapes, thereby creating a townscape. A large rectangle in the mix of these shapes contains, in contrast to the dominant geometry of the image, extremely active, crisscrossed serpentine and curving lines, two circles and a few arrows, presenting a microcosm of an animated universe like *Small Worlds*, Kandinsky’s 1922 set of twelve prints. Amidst the house-like arrows is a large brown triangle, and on the left side of the picture is a brown, vertical bar, both presumably sources of the double-brown sound of the title. The upper third of the composition is much less dense, suggesting a celestial realm with a large sphere overlapped by a transparent triangle, and the two largest arrows that point straight down and diagonally upward. The house-like arrows conduct and emit sound. In the words of the Chukchee shaman, “The walls of the house have voices of their own.” Numerous arrows point in multiple directions distributing sounds far and wide. Viewed in this way *Brown Double Sound* is surprisingly representational, a depiction of Kandinsky’s (re)sounding cosmos. As Paul Klee, Kandinsky’s closest colleague at the Bauhaus, and from whom he likely appropriated the arrow motif, wrote, “Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible.”

At the Bauhaus, Kandinsky attempted to achieve a synthesis of symbolic and formalist abstraction, which he addressed in his text *Point and Line to Plane*, published in 1926. This project, however, did not compromise his commitment to the spirit within. In 1927 he wrote, “The analysis of the external element of form should act as a pointer to its internal element,” and nine years later in Paris he declared, “that what interests me in abstract art, and why I am attracted to it, is its superior spirituality.” A painting done the year *Point and Line to Plane* was published, *Three Sounds*, is telling in this regard (Figure 1.7). It is obviously a landscape with a horizon line, three trees, a pale blue sky with a rain bow, and a large, hovering celestial sphere. A tree overlaps one of the three triangular sounds in the center of the painting, and all of them appear to have originated in the nearby trees. The sounds give off a couple of dozen bubbles, releasing their spiritual perfume into the world. Again, Kandinsky gives us a very representational picture, affirming the indigenous belief that trees emit sounds and have souls. Furthermore, the stylized landscape elements are reminiscent of pictographs of trees, mountain chains (here upside down), rainbows, and celestial bodies on Sami and Siberian drums.



Kandinsky continued to detect the sounds of an animated universe in the most ordinary circumstances. In *Point and Line to Plane* he wrote,

The open eye and the open ear transform the slightest disturbance into a profound experience. Voices are heard on every side. The world resounds. Like an explorer immersing himself in new, unknown lands, one makes discoveries in one's "daily round," and one's environment, normally mute, begins to speak an increasingly distinct language. Thus, dead signs turn into living symbols. The dead comes to life.

That dead signs come to life can only mean that souls permeate everything. Consequently, art must be "permanently living," possessing "an inner life of the living



Figure 1.7 Wassily Kandinsky, *Three Sounds (Drei Klänge)*, 59.9 × 59.6 cm, oil on canvas, August 1926, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Photo credit: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Art Resource, NY. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



forces employed,” a recurring theme in comments he made about his work. In the twentieth century, artists so routinely spoke about “living pictures” that it has become something of a cliché, but few went so far as Kandinsky into mysticism. “Creations of this art ... belong to the spiritual world.” It is not only Symbolist and Theosophical-Anthroposophical concepts of spirit that underlie Kandinsky’s thinking, but his animistic-shamanistic orientation as well. His philosophy of art has much in common with the finding of W. L. Sierozewski in his study of the Yakuts in eastern Siberia – first published by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society the year before Kandinsky departed for Munich – that “All objects that bear traces of human handiwork have souls (*ichechi*).”

Kandinsky remained remarkably consistent in his pronouncements over the years. In “On the Question of Form” he wrote, “within the picture, when a line is freed from the purpose of indicating an object, and itself functions as a thing, its inner sound is not weakened by being forced to play an incidental role, and assumes its full, inner power. In *Point and Line to Plane* he stated, “straight lines are ... individual and isolated living entities ... The same is true for various angles, curved and zig-zag lines. They all develop a powerful sound, which can never entirely be drowned and therefore represent the primordial sound of the straight line.” These lines are used to create the outlines of geometrical forms that have their own spiritual values, modified by the effects of color. Before lines and colors are placed on the blank canvas, Kandinsky uncharacteristically assumed, “that every artist can hear the ‘breathing’ of the still untouched P[icture] P[lane] – albeit unconsciously – and that he will feel – more or less consciously – responsible for its existence.” In this instance Kandinsky seems to be speaking of the “living picture” in more conventional terms, as he refers to the experience of every artist. He certainly did not believe that every artist was, in Steiner’s words, “awakened in soul and spirit” and hears the call of “inner necessity” that for him was instrumental in guiding the creation of spiritually authentic art.

Kandinsky twice reprised his most animistic statement towards the end of his life after it had appeared in “Reminiscences” more than twenty years earlier. Published verbatim in essays from 1935 and 1937, he recalled one of the most momentous experiences of his life and its central importance for his theory of art.

Everything “dead” trembled. Everything showed me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul ... even a cigar butt lying in the ashtray, a patient white trouser-button looking up at you from a puddle on a street, a submissive piece of bark carried through the long grass in the ant’s strong jaws to some uncertain and vital end.

Attributing a soul to a cigar butt might seem off, but is something that shamanic peoples of Eurasia would not hesitate to do.

Kandinsky was enamored with sound. A competent cellist, he loved music. He



claimed that sounds stimulate a sense of various colors, and colors stimulate a sense of diverse sounds. According to Kandinsky, words, independent of their meanings, especially repeated a number of times, produce pure, inner sounds that act on the soul.

This is what the Russian Symbolist Afanasy Fet meant when he imagined a spiritual realm “where the word is dumb, where sound reigns.” Kandinsky, in his daily rounds, heard voices on every side. The cigar butt, trouser button, and piece of bark were able to produce sounds because they had secret souls. Sounds, whether discernible in the external world or heard in the mind, give evidence of the spiritual in all existence. The Symbolists heard the inner sounds as did the Theosophists, but long before them indigenous peoples spoke to and heard the voices of animate and inanimate objects. Kandinsky’s powerful desire to supplant the materialism of his age with a reinvigorated spirituality made it easy for him to intertwine two world views with which he was intimately familiar: Steiner’s Theosophical-Anthroposophical conviction that higher states of consciousness would overcome “the materialistic concept of the world that penetrates everything,” and Tylor’s contention that animism “embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy.” The world sounds.



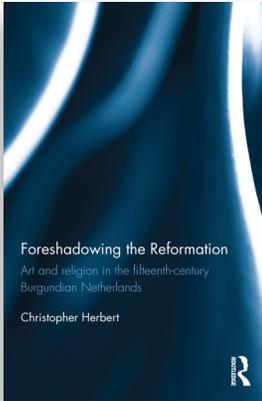


CHAPTER

2

# Funerary monuments and entombment groups: Religion and art in large format

## 2:: Funerary monuments and entombment groups: Religion and art in large format



The following is excerpted from *Foreshadowing the Reformation* by Christopher Herbert. © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

To purchase a copy, [click here](#).

On April 27, 1404, Philip the Bold died. He was staying at the Stag Inn at Halle, about nine miles (fifteen kilometres) south-west of Brussels. The funeral organisation immediately swung into action. His entrails were buried in Our Lady's, Halle – there was a statue of Mary there, a so-called Black Madonna suckling the Christ child. It had been given to the Church in the late thirteenth century and was an important pilgrimage shrine, visited by many, including King Edward I of England. The duke's heart was taken to the royal mausoleum of the Valois family at St Denis, Paris, but his embalmed body, dressed in the robes of a Carthusian monk, was placed in a large and immensely heavy lead coffin ready for the funeral procession.

On May 1, five days after his death, six horses were harnessed in their traces and pulled the hearse out of Halle on its long journey. At each corner were four banners which displayed the duke's coat of arms and the pall itself was made of cloth-of-gold edged with black. The body was accompanied by the duke's two sons, John and Anthony, plus numbers of attendants, including sixteen chaplains from the duke's own chapel, plus sixty "official mourners" dressed in black. They made their slow processional way through Courtrai, Oudenaarde and Lille until they arrived at Douai. There the whole cortège rested for ten days, before making its way southwards across French territory.

On May 28, the procession arrived at the Benedictine abbey of St Seine in Burgundy and rested for a further three weeks, whilst the new duke, John the Fearless, made his way to Paris to deal with his father's former staff. Eventually, the procession re-formed and moved off again until they came to Val-Suzon, a tiny village about ten miles from Dijon. There they were met by the civic dignitaries of Dijon, accompanied by one hundred burgesses and one hundred poor mourners dressed in black. Again the procession made its way forward until they reached the outskirts of Dijon. At the city walls, the clergy of the city joined the procession until they reached the Champmol. And in the Charterhouse of Champmol on June 16, 1404, after a processional journey which had lasted just over five weeks, they interred the duke's body in the tomb, which, during his lifetime, he had observed from his oratory. It was the end of one era and the beginnings of another.

That great tomb, with its row of sculpted *pleurants* in a mourning procession at the base, was not completed for the interment. In fact, most of the *pleurants* were carved in the years following, and after the death of Claus Sluter in 1306, the work continued under the guidance of his nephew, Claus de Werve. From remaining accounts, we know that amongst Jean de Marville's workshop (he oversaw the initial stages of the tomb) were not only specialist carvers but also a woman from Paris who was a marble polisher. Much of the tomb was destroyed in the French Revolution, only the angels at



the head of the tomb, the hands of the ducal effigy and the lion at its feet are original. It is now housed in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon, part of what was once the ducal palace.

Placed as it was in the centre of the choir of Champmol, the effigy of the duke, resting on a black marble slab which had been hewn from a quarry near Namur, ensured that the memory of Philip the Bold lived on. But it was more than a memorial. It also had a religious purpose. It was to remind the Carthusian monks who their patron had been and that they should pray for his soul in purgatory. The forty-one sculpted *pleurants*, led by a choirboy carrying an *aspergillum* (a holy water stoup) and including not only Carthusian monks but also a bishop, weepers (professional mourners) nobles and clergy, are each shown in a different attitude of bodily mourning. They too had a religious function. They were a reminder to the living monks, and anyone else who saw the tomb, of the ubiquity of death and therefore of the theology of salvation.

However, the mostly veiled figures had another, perhaps more human function. It is the fact that their faces are veiled which is the key. We are forced by Sluter and de Werve to imagine, from the bodily attitudes of the *pleurants* and from the fall of their clothes, what their emotions might have been. It has been argued persuasively by John Moffitt that this dramatic and powerful concept of the veiled face can be traced back to a play by Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*; the writings of Pliny about the skill of the artist Timanthes in his work, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*; and via him to Quintillian and Cicero and thence into the classical repertoire of European thinking.

But it marks a new departure in both sculpture and painting in Northern Europe. It is the individuality of the figural, emotional responses to grief which make them so sympathetic and engaging. It represents the first stirrings of that artistic interest in individual, emotional traits which would be developed later by painters such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden.

John the Fearless was so impressed with the work of Claus de Werve that he ordered a tomb for himself from the sculptor. He wanted it to be a double one, with room for his wife, Margaret of Bavaria (Philip the Bold's wife, Margaret of Flanders, who died only one year after her husband, was buried next to her parents in Lille). Unfortunately, John the Fearless lost interest in the project, and when he was murdered in 1419, the tomb was not ready to be used by him. His son, Philip the Good, knowing of his father's hopes, nevertheless set out to complete the task. He did so by employing first, a Spanish sculptor called Juan de la Huerta, but de la Huerta left Dijon in 1456 before completing the project, and then Philip the Good employed a French sculptor from Avignon called Antoine le Moiturier, although Philip delayed asking him until 1462. Again there were delays and the monument was not completed until 1470, by which time Philip the Good himself had died (he was buried initially in Bruges before being brought back to Dijon, but no monument was erected in his honour)



Nevertheless, those early Burgundian tombs of Philip the Bold and John the Fearless had started a fashion amongst the senior members of the royal households in France. So, for example, Charles I of Bourbon, son-in-law of John the Fearless, ordered a similar tomb effigy for his own tomb at Souvigny, as did Jean de France, Duke of Berry, for his grave at Bourges. Other effigies to note of that period (many were destroyed in the French Revolution) include the effigy of Anne (1404–1432), sister of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. She was the wife of John, Duke of Bedford, brother of King Henry V. Sometime between 1436 and 1444/1445, her tomb was created by a man called Guillame Vluten, having been commissioned by Philip. The effigy was made from white marble and was designed as part of a wall-funerary monument in the Celestine Church of Paris.

The tomb, heavily restored and changed in the late-sixteenth/early-seventeenth century, now consists of her effigy, which has been described as having a “portrait-like quality”, although it probably follows the models of the time and, in spite of one or two features, cannot be described as providing an accurate picture of her. Originally, her effigy lay on a black marble slab, such as that of the tomb of Philip the Bold, her grandfather, in Dijon, and was likely to have been a sign of her high status. The tomb also originally had seven mourners, including her brother Philip the Good, which were probably arranged along the base of her tomb, but again, those have been destroyed and the placing of the mourners is a hypothetical one. So the tomb is, relatively speaking, conservative in style but obviously drew on the design of the Dijon tomb of Philip the Bold. In some ways, especially in relation to the effigy, it marks an evolution towards the “real” portraits of Burgundian artists.

And then there is the much later tomb of Mary of Burgundy. She died as the result of a hunting accident in 1482. Her monument is to be found in the retro-choir of Our Lady’s, Bruges. Her effigy is made not of stone but of gilt/bronze, but rests on a black stone slab. On either side of the tomb are not mourners, but beautifully articulated family trees complete with coats of arms; one of the family trees relates to her father, the last Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, and the other to her mother, Isabella of Bourbon. The effigy is probably a reasonably accurate portrait of Mary rather than a generalised likeness. She asked in her will that there should be an image of the Virgin Mary in front of the sepulchre. Whether or not her wishes in this regard were ever carried out, is not known. She also asked that sets of liturgical garments should be made, not only for her own tomb but also for that of her uncle, Jacques de Bourbon, at St Donatian’s. Clearly, the celebration of Mass and prayers for the repose of her soul were firmly in her mind.

This tomb, then, echoes earlier Burgundian funerary monuments, but in its iconography, especially in doing away with the mourners and substituting instead the family trees, it was a tomb which was as much about lineal descent and legitimacy of





rule, as it was about religious belief.

To this series of tombs we must add that of Philippe Pot (1428–1493), now in the Louvre. He was a Burgundian nobleman, a member of the Order of the Golden Fleece and godson of Philip the Good. He was deeply involved in the political and territorial ambitions of the Burgundian Dukes and amongst other achievements was instrumental in arranging the marriage of Charles the Bold to his first wife, Catherine de Valois and, when she died, ensured that Charles should marry Isabel de Bourbon.

Philippe Pot's tomb was created by Antoine le Moiturier, who had worked on the tomb of John the Fearless, so perhaps it is not surprising that Philippe's funerary monument should reprise some of the features of those Dijon tombs. It depicts him dressed as a knight, his visor open, his hands clasped in prayer, a lion resting at his feet. But what makes this monument so striking is the use that has been made of the *pleurants*. There are eight of them, all with hidden faces but made recognisable as members of the family by the escutcheons they carry, and in their voluminous black robes, they act as the bearers of the tomb slab on which the knightly Philippe Pot rests. There is something slightly macabre, even sinister, about the whole thing. They are not expressions of mourners in grief, as was the case with the *pleurants* in Dijon; they mimic the Dijon *pleurants* without conveying any of their sympathetic understanding or psychological subtlety.

In spite of careful regard being paid to the Burgundian tombs, we must never fail to recognise that many were destroyed in the French Revolution and so drawing hard and fast conclusions is difficult. But it is possible to see, even in the limited number that still exist, that religious belief was of considerable significance. Of course, those tombs were also about status, power and authority, but they were under-pinned by a deep and all-pervasive theological world-view which is now almost impossible for us to imagine or understand. The irony of Duke Philip the Bold being buried in a Carthusian habit is a matter of sceptical humour for us in our generation, but it would have been regarded in an entirely different way by him. It was about his place in Salvation History, recognising, in spite of all the pomp and circumstance, that his soul was as fragile and potentially evanescent as the next man's. It is as much about his view of his potential life beyond death as it is about his status on earth.

One of the things he had undoubtedly achieved in his earthly life was to create in Dijon a kind of artistic and sculptural school which had the task of furnishing the Champmol and the duke's other residences with its work. In such a small community, the workshop members must have had a great influence upon each other, and since those times, much effort has been spent by art historians trying to discern who might have influenced whom. At the apex of these influences was Claus Sluter, for his distinctive and powerful style seems to have influenced sculpture across a wide region. And the work on *The Well of Moses* has left its echoing presence amongst other



sculptural forms in Burgundy and beyond.

So far in this chapter, we have been looking at funerary monuments, but the Dijon sculptors were involved in other commissions as well, including Entombment Groups in which a life-sized figure of Jesus is laid in his tomb surrounded by his mother, disciples and friends. But here we enter a puzzle. That such sculptural groups existed, we cannot doubt, but the question is whether the very first of such groups might have come from the ducal workshops at Dijon.

There is one clue which has been taken to indicate that this might be the case. In the 1408 accounts for Champmol is a phrase which refers to a delivery of stone which the sculptor Hennequin de Prindal was to use for “the sepulchre”. Some have taken this to mean that this stone was to be used to create an Entombment Group and others have argued that it was for the tomb of John the Fearless. Either way, unless more documentary evidence comes to light, we cannot be certain. There is no currently existing Entombment Group at the Charterhouse of Champmol. A claim has been made that the earliest surviving Entombment Group is that at Pont-à-Mousson, near Nancy. It is a long way geographically from Dijon, but this is not to say that there was no connection. William Forsyth<sup>8</sup> puts it very carefully: “It is quite likely that the workshop . . . knew the famous sculptures of Champmol . . . [but] stylistically, it cannot be closely tied to existing sculpture of the Dijon school”. In fact, Forsyth argues for a stronger Germanic influence.

However, not far from Dijon is the cathedral of Langres, and although at the time it was in the sphere of influence of France, the Bishop of Langres held one of his episcopal courts in Dijon. Documentary evidence about the function of the Langres Entombment Group is strong. A document of 1420 refers to Masses being endowed by Jean Marchant, and it refers to a representation of the Entombment being created. Later the bishop offered Indulgences to any who said their prayers in front of it. Again, tragically, some of this group was destroyed in the revolution.

About one hundred miles south of Dijon is Bourg-en-Bresse, and there in the Church of the Cordeliers in 1445, an Entombment Group was created. Again, the Church has been destroyed and only parts of the ensemble remain, but they appear to have some kind of stylistic connection with Burgundy.

So far, then, it is all a tiny bit frustrating. But then we come back to Dijon itself and to a retable created by Jacques de Baerze in 1393 for Champmol. And there we can see on the right-hand side what appears to be a miniature Entombment. It features Joseph and Nicodemus lowering the body into the tomb, and centrally, behind the body, is Mary. (The centrality of Mary was to become a standard feature of later large-scale Burgundian Entombments). It is heavily gilded and has a lively, tender and well-balanced feel.

About fifteen miles south of Dijon in the village church of Bessey-les-Citeaux is



another miniature Entombment, only this time carved in stone. It is an altar relief and is signed “Claus”, which some have taken to refer to the sculptor Claus de Werve, and the inscription makes clear that the donor was a man called Jehan de Noys, who was the Confessor of Margaret, the wife of John the Fearless.

It begins to seem as though we are now more firmly on a Burgundian trail. And when we get to the thirteenth-century hospital foundation of Notre Dame des Fontenilles in Tonnerre (about ninety miles from Dijon), we can say with certainty that we have arrived. This hospital was famous in its day. It had been the inspiring model for Nicholas Rolin’s hospital at Beaune, and fortunately for later art historians, the documentation for the Entombment is extant. It states that the donor in the early 1450s was a wealthy local citizen called Lancelot de Buronfosse, and the sculptors were Jehan Michiel and George de la Sonnecte: stylistically, it looks likely that they had trained in Dijon. In return for the precious gift of a Holy Sepulchre (it is housed in a separate small room down a flight of stairs at the east end of the hospital), the hospital promised Lancelot an annual anniversary service at which, on the eve of the service and on the day itself, three Masses would be sung. Moreover, it promised that when Lancelot died, he, his heirs and successors would have the right to be buried in the sepulchre chapel. The hospital clearly expected to receive regular sums of money from pilgrims coming to pray in front of their Holy Sepulchre. It was a mutually beneficial gift.

There is no need to trace the regional development of these Entombment Groups across Europe; that has already been very ably done by William Forsyth, although a lively, wealthy and highly skilled “school” at Dijon might well have been the catalyst for the furtherance of these Entombment Groups across (predominantly) Eastern France, notwithstanding the undoubtedly strong influences that also came across from the Rhineland from their prototypical Holy Sepulchres.

But the quality of the sculptures at Champmol and in the Entombment Groups point inexorably to the underlying theological and spiritual energies which brought so many of them to life. The funerary monuments at Champmol, it has to be admitted, probably had a limited viewing audience, and the Entombment Groups also were primarily intended as images for private chapels in front of which prayers and Masses could be said, but in both cases, imaginations were heightened and stirred. Religion seemed able to express itself not only in the architecture of large-scale churches and cathedrals across the region but also in monuments associated with death and with quietly awe-inspiring Entombment Groups which promoted both prayer and sympathetic human understanding.



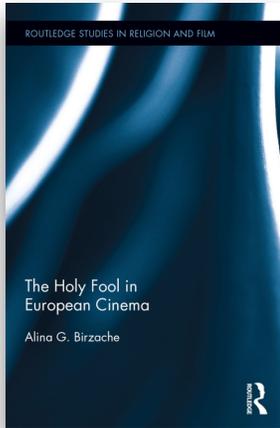


CHAPTER

3

# Speaking Truth to Power: The Holy Fool in Soviet and Russian Cinema

# Speaking Truth to Power: The Holy Fool in Soviet and Russian Cinema



The following is excerpted from *The Holy Fool in European Cinema* by Alina G. Birzache. © 2016 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

To purchase a copy, [click here](#).

Shall I not go on my knees before you in the mud,  
Blessing the trace of thy bare foot,  
You homeless, wretched, drunken  
Russia—you fool in Christ.

Maximilian Voloshin, *Holy Russia* (1917)

In the Soviet director Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* the image of a strange, bearded, long-haired man carrying thick chains across his naked body and admonishing an anointed ruler with harsh words would make for a striking appearance of folly in any historical film. To a Russian audience, however, it is less clear that such iconography would be considered extraordinary. In Russian culture the holy fool inhabits a paradoxical situation: While traditionally defined by marginality, the *iurodivyi*—the Russian holy fool—has also entered the discourse of mainstream culture, following a move from the realm of the Church into the secular arts and cultural theory. The premodern figure of the holy fool has been rediscovered in modern Russia as a versatile tool, not only to pinpoint the nation's historical idiosyncrasies, but also as a means to help define its contemporary culture. I am beginning my comparative study of holy foolishness in European cinema with Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, because it is here that the concept is most clearly rooted and defined within the boundaries of a national religious tradition.

This tradition has endowed the holy fool with powerful critical functions. In the analysis that follows I will suggest that the appearance of the holy fool in Soviet and Russian cinema is part of a subversive visual discourse that repositions the holy fool as a powerful critic of the existing order. In order to explain this development I will begin by considering the aesthetic and ethical aspects of holy foolishness in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and their relation to the critical function of the holy fool. I will then turn to the political function of the holy fool as expressed in the 'Russian Idea': an historical, socio-political and religious canvas on which the critical practice of holy foolishness can be understood. Russian culture presents us with an unusually complex situation, since holy foolishness designates not only a theological category but also a popular cultural phenomenon. Since the figure of the holy fool is translated outside the strictly religious sphere, cultural re-interpretations result in stylized versions of the holy fool. For this reason the chapter will split discussion of the figure in Soviet/Russian cinema into two sections. First, I will examine portrayals of holy fools that were directly inspired by hagiographic models. These figures emerge in the films of the Soviet directors Sergei Eisenstein, Sergei Bondarchuk, Elem Klimov, and also



more recently in the work of the Russian director Pavel Lungin. The second section will examine stylized portrayals of the holy fool figure, as prominent in the Soviet and post-Soviet films of the directors Pyotr Todorovsky, Tengiz Abuladze, Alexander Kaidanovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, Konstantin Lopushansky, Karen Shakhnazarov and Aleksandr Gornovsky. One notable absentee here is the director Andrei Tarkovsky, who will be considered separately in the next chapter on account of the pioneering and sophisticated way in which the idea appears in his work. I argue that, in spite of the many different forms that stylized holy fools take when compared to their hagiographical-inspired counterparts, the figure still retains, implicitly or explicitly, the same subversive critical function.

### **THE AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL FUNCTIONS OF HOLY FOOLISHNESS IN RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY**

Before we move to examine holy foolishness in Russian film, it is worth considering some aesthetic aspects which surface in the cinematic portrayal of holy fools. This is necessary because various aesthetic features of holy foolishness appear in Russian culture to a degree unmatched elsewhere. These features were derived from the canonical representations of holy fools in Byzantium and for this reason are applicable to all those holy fools inspired by a hagiographical tradition. These considerations will help explain how the simple presence of a holy fool can be such a powerful critical device, holding a mirror to contemporary assumptions and forcing reconsideration of existing political and social structures.

In different settings we find distinct aspects of holy foolishness accentuated. Sergei Ivanov observes that: 'The culture which gives birth and semantic form to the concept of holy foolery notes and endows with meaning only these features of insane behaviour which are conceptually relevant to it, while ignoring the rest'. In Russian culture two prominent features of the holy fool model are public humiliation and degradation, which can take the form of the ugly, the repulsive and the grotesque. Often holy fools walk around in rags or almost naked while their deeds can be annoying or even terrifying, and their words simple gibberish. Through his/her behaviour and appearance the holy fool contravenes conventional forms of decency in order to express sheer abjection. This has aesthetical as well as ethical implications, by confounding the distinctions between beauty and ugliness, cleanness and uncleanness, and purity and impurity. In what follows I will uncover the significance embedded in their *modus vivendi*.

After the Second World War, the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin developed a powerful theory of the grotesque which was to influence cultural studies inside and outside Russia. In his writings the fool appears as a literary figure, in which he includes the Orthodox *iurodivyi*, and the figure is connected to the more general categories of



the carnivalesque and the grotesque. In his *Rabelais and His World* (1965) Bakhtin argues that in conjunction with religious festivals representing official 'high' culture, and in opposition to their seriousness and loftiness, joyful and popular celebrations also took place such as the Feast of Fools, the Feast of the Ass, and the Carnival. Fools were a familiar figure in these celebrations, having a role to enact a reversal of the existing social hierarchy. As a consequence of this symbolic reversal, not only are the lowest strata of society elevated, but also everything that has to do with the lower parts of the body and its biological functions. Grotesque realism is the expression of 'man's vivid awareness of his materiality, [and] of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth'. What carnivalization achieves is a 'joyful relativity' in contrast with the dogmatism of an official culture seeking to preserve a given social order. Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque captures the spirit of the medieval ceremonial fools, but its valorization of the corporeal does not offer a definitive explanation of the Russian *iurodstvo*.

Building on Bakhtin's theoretical premises, A.M. Panchenko sees the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* as occupying an intermediate position between the popular culture of laughter and official church culture. It gives rise to a world turned upside-down; a counter-world which subverts the logic of the dominant culture. Here not only do we find questioning of that which the world holds as virtue, but also an undermining of aesthetic values. For this reason, Panchenko argues, *iurodstvo* is also a rejection of the ideal of the beautiful and an elevation of the ugly to an aesthetical principle, with aesthetical elements being absorbed into the ethical. He identifies two precursors: the Cynical school of philosophy and a strand in Christianity itself which he traces back to the customary connection established between carnal beauty and the devil, and also to the tradition represented by Justin, Origen, Clemens of Alexandria and Tertullian, which reflected on the ugliness of Christ: a trait that in the Old Testament was regarded as messianic.

*Iurodstvo*, as an *imitatio Christi* practice, is indeed a continuation of this old theological tradition. In this respect its sources are both biblical and patristic. The passage from Isaiah referring to the 'suffering servant' or the 'man of sorrows' has been interpreted in Orthodox Christian literature as a reference to the Messiah, and more specifically to the moment of His passion: 'he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53: 2–3). The chapters from Paul's *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, which are credited in hagiographical texts as the origin of the practice of holy foolishness, indirectly reinforce this Old Testament imagery in a way that 'revolutionizes ancient perception and philosophy'. By directing his rhetorical skills against tendencies in the Corinthian community, the apostle Paul returned his attention to the weak, the foolish and the low





in society. In his preaching the whole hierarchy of ancient values has been turned upside down by the cross, for which reason the Greeks consider it foolishness. After the fourth century the emphasis started to fall more on the cross as a symbol of Christ's triumph rather than of His torture, especially as a result of the Emperor Constantine's victory over his enemies under this sign. Early church writers such as Clemens of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian write about the 'ugly' appearance of Christ on the basis of Isaiah 53 and also justify it as an effective mode of preaching, which does not distract attention from Christ's words.

The iconoclastic drive of the Byzantine and Russian holy fools can, therefore, be interpreted as following in the steps of this 'cult of the ugly' present in the early Church which stood in stark contrast to Greek ideals of classical beauty. The art of representing the canonical holy fool in grotesque naturalism is called 'paradoxical' by Jostein Børtnes, since it is 'grounded in the principle of contrast, reducing the points of similarity between the "earthy" and the "upperworldly", the visible and the invisible, to a minimum'. For this reason the holy fool, more than any other kind of saint, is an incognito servant of God. This 'inverted symbolism' whereby the most base and despised things designate the most elevated reality has an ethical dimension. When in a hagiographic, literary or cinematic work the debasement of the holy fool appears in a context, it develops a critical function, involuntary or not. The holy fool does not have to pass explicit judgment because the visual force of the representation can itself challenge contemporary norms.

Given these aesthetical and ethical characteristics of traditional holy foolishness, how are they given value in subsequent literary and cinematic works? A useful concept is *ostranenie*—defamiliarization—proposed by Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), a key figure of the Russian Formalist School. *Ostranenie* is the means whereby something is made strange so that habitual perceptions are imbued with a refreshed vision. Firstly, it can be applied to art in general, as a way to distinguish it from ordinary experience; and secondly it is an artistic device that creates unusual perspectives. The fool brings with him/her a worldview that is deviant from the ethos of civil society, and as a result it is perceived as foolish or scandalous. By throwing in this provocation, *iurodstvo* achieves the defamiliarization necessary to look at society's values anew. While defamiliarization is conceived as an artistic device within the practice of the formalist school, in the case of holy foolishness the defamiliarization achieved by scandal expands into the realm of the ethical, social and political. As Antoci observes: 'Scandal gives these marginal deeds the valence necessary to engage mainstream persons and institutions'. The fool, by eschewing the assumptions of the dominant culture, becomes a stranger to that culture and, from the position of the outsider, confronts society about its own clichés. The function of the fool in connection with society has similarities with the function of the parable as interpreted by the New



Testament scholar J.D. Crossan. While the role of the myth is to establish worldviews, he argues that the function of the parable is to 'create contradiction within a given situation of complacent security . . . [in order] to challenge the fundamental principle of security'. We could indeed say that there is a great deal of parabolic intention that gives the fools their critical edge. Having explored the aesthetic and ethical functions of the holy fools, I will now turn to the political power with which they have been invested, best captured in the context of the politico-religious narrative known under the name of the 'Russian Idea'.

### **THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF THE HOLY FOOL WITHIN THE 'RUSSIAN IDEA'**

In 1996, as part of the commemoration of a Century of Cinema, the British Film Institute released the documentary *The Russian Idea*, directed by Sergey Selyanov and scripted by Oleg Kovalov. Here the 'Russian Idea', understood as the mission to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, is paradoxically shown to be the shaping force behind post-revolutionary cinema. According to the documentary, this tradition was shaped in the 1920s by avant-garde directors including Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, and reached a climax with the final scene of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. The argument is reliant on Nikolai Berdyaev's version of the 'Russian Idea' as a national messianic mission characterized by opposing elements and suspended between two opposed kingdoms: the here and now versus the eternal everlasting. This essentially religious idea is used to interpret the very reality that denied it: on this scheme, communism becomes the manifestation of religious utopia, the dream of heaven on earth. The way to achieve this is through the self-sacrifice of the hero for the sake of a radiant future. Individual salvation is impossible, and the hero accepts his sacrifice for the salvation of all. Ultimately, Selyanov and Kovalov claim, the 'Russian Idea' also refers to the unresolved opposition between the state, with the Tsar as its representative, and the 'Kingdom', represented by the holy fool. The documentary is by no means extensive but conveys a number of important elements that make up the historically layered meanings of the 'Russian Idea'.

Essentially a religious narrative, the 'Russian Idea' mobilizes both social and political elements. Its pivotal significance for understanding Russian identity and culture resides in the explanation it offers of the messianic mission of the Russian people, which accounts for both its particularism and universalism. From this messianic understanding of the historical role of the Russian nation and the terms on which it has been fashioned stem a series of ideas relevant to the context of our discussion. These shape debates in the public arena to such an extent that artistic artifacts such as films are categorized according to criteria that take into account the engagement with these ideas. For example, George Faraday proposes four opposing positions available to the Russian directors: messianic elitism, amoral elitism, messianic populism and amoral



populism, which are formed at the intersection of two axes: the ideological message and the targeted public.

The 'Russian Idea' is intimately linked to national identity because its three institutional pillars are the Orthodox Church, the Tsarist state and the peasant commune, which taken together are often regarded as constitutive of Russian identity. I will not attempt here a review of the many shapes that the idea has taken in the socio-political theories of different thinkers, but will rather pinpoint the dynamic between the forces at play and how this accounts for the genesis and evolution of the practice of holy foolishness. Coined by Dostoevsky at about 1860, the 'Russian Idea' was first discussed in a systematic way by the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev in a talk given in Paris in 1889 and published in French and Russian in 1889 and 1909, respectively. In his moral philosophy the 'Russian Idea' acquired universalistic tones: Russia being seen in the service of all other nations. The idea only reached theoretical acuity in the work of another philosopher, Nicolai Berdyaev, especially in his *The Russian Idea* (1946). In this text Berdyaev gave an historical overview of a religious conception with social and political ramifications that harked back to the fifteenth century but which rose into national consciousness through the nineteenth-century debates between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, when it was conceived in opposition to what was seen as Western European individualism and rationalism.

Crucial for the inception of the idea was an historical event which caused the Russian kingdom to become focused on the messianic idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Turks in 1453, the Russian people began to see themselves as the last bulwark and their mission to preserve and perpetuate the Orthodox faith. The rationale for the idea owes much to a monk from Pskov, Philoteus, who, in a letter to Basil III in 1511, argued that the Russian church had been invested with a divine mission as the protector of Orthodoxy, which demanded of its rulers special moral responsibilities for preserving the purity of faith. Two forces were envisioned as Christ-bearers: the people (the Church) and the ruler, which were to work together in a harmonious relationship for the realization of this divine mission.

As the monk proposed, the religious idea of the Third Rome was inextricably dependent on the political establishment for its realization. But soon this ideal form of government was to degenerate into autocracy under the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1530–84). Berdyaev notes the inherent tension that lay beneath attempts to put the ideal vision into practice:

The doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome became the basic idea on which the Muscovite state was formed. The kingdom was consolidated and shaped under the symbol of a messianic idea. The search for true, ideal kingship was characteristic of the Russian people throughout history. . . . But the religious idea of the kingdom took shape in the powerful state in which the Church was



to play a subservient part. The Moscow Orthodox kingdom was a totalitarian state.

The notorious theoretician of Russian autocracy was Ivan the Terrible. Interestingly, in opposition to his political vision, a new concept arose: that of 'Holy Russia'. Michael Cherniavsky interprets it as an 'antitsarist, antistate slogan', expressing a popular ideology that existed outside the political establishment. The stage was set for future confrontations, often stemming from an attempt to rescue individual liberty and equality at the expense of centralised power, be it political or ecclesiastical. The framework was religious, supported through a messianic vision of national destiny. This has frequently generated apocalyptic feelings and interpretations whenever an obstacle appeared to block the ideal, so that messianism and apocalypticism in this context are closely related. This is important to observe because it helps us understand the apocalyptic atmosphere that dominated Lopushansky's and Tarkovsky's films and informed the latter's mindset during his twilight years.

How does the holy fool tie relate to these concepts? Nancy Condee makes the suggestion that the figure of the holy fool is a means to give expression to the paradoxes and contradictions embedded in the 'Russian Idea'. I would go further. The holy fool figure's principle of construction, paradoxically uniting the sublime with the abject, makes it an excellent vehicle to voice the tension created between institutionalized power and the ideal of a commune. On a symbolic level it becomes an ideal to represent tensions on two levels: between the kenotic, humiliated Christ and the glorified Christ, and also between the historical and the eschatological realities. The fool's life is a celebration of the virtue of humility: the very virtue that forms the foundation of the Russian spirituality.

The holy fool's logic of construction (if textualized), or action (if practiced in reality), is based on inversion, since destitution and suffering in this world are taken to be indicative of high status in the next. This often takes the form of a political function. If the hagiographies do not ascribe directly a political function to the holy fool, it is clear that it is implied in the numerous episodes in which the holy fool is pitted against the secular power. John Saward notices that the holy fools are most common at a time of political tranquility, when the Church is absorbed by the political status quo. When applied to the Russian context such 'tranquility' is not to be understood as an induced state of spiritual torpor. As G.P. Fedotov explains, the sixteenth century was a peculiarly fruitful time for holy foolishness due to these special historical circumstances. The forms of autocratic Tsardom and the subservient role of the church were widely believed to be in need of correction. Similar to the Old Testament prophets on whose archetype the figure was fashioned, the holy fool took a stand against the rulers' abuse of power and their betrayal of what was seen as the Christian mission.

In a peculiar way, the holy fool came to threaten the tendencies towards



absolutism manifested by the state or the Church not so much through his/ her words but principally by the values he/she stood for; in this case, the values embraced by 'Holy Russia'. An ideal social model like 'Holy Russia' is complemented by a spiritual one: a community conceived as 'opposed to law, abstract associations, formal organization, and mutual interest' is instead supported by a vision in which the human being is governed not through external prescriptions but by the voice of the conscience—the voice of God. This vision undermines any worldly authority whether regulated by laws or autocratic since it raises to the status of ultimate authority the voice of God embodied in the community that people form. Furthermore, the holy fool's extreme humility as a form of asceticism and his/her subsequent humiliation as a form of sharing in the passions of Christ, as well as his/her non-resistance to evil and lack of any socio-political ambitions, stand in stark contrast to the state's political ideology and also to the Church's practices when she embraces worldly mentalities and structures. As John Saward remarks, the holy fool's political power is 'dependent upon his being an unstable and strange element' in a closely knit society.

There remains one further important reason why the holy fool integrates so well into the Russian Idea narrative and which also illuminates the religious grounds that underpin the political singularity of Russia in the history of European civilization. What relinquishing one's mind suggests intuitively in terms of the holy fool's attitude towards reason is spelled out by one of the theorists of the Russian Idea, the founder of the Slavophilic movement Ivan Kireevsky (1806–56). In his view the spiritual divide between East and West is a result of the latter's rationalist spirit and individualism. On this argument European culture has lost its inner wholeness and become fragmented as a result of a deviation into abstract rationalism. This is reflected, Kireevsky argues, not only in religion but in the whole Western civilization. We could, therefore, say that from a Slavophile perspective the holy fool figure is a bastion against this rationalism, as a champion of the logic of the heart over the logic of reason. This intermingling between the religious and the political accounts for the holy fool's participation in a debate that is both spiritual and political. Having shown the many-faceted significance of holy fools in Russia, we can now turn to their representation in the cinematic tradition of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

### **CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HAGIOGRAPHIC HOLY FOOL**

Peter C. Bouteneff usefully proposed that the figure of the hagiographic holy fool could be broken into three types: the scandalous prankster, the 'terrifying ascetic' and the blessed idiot. In cinema, I would argue, this has branched in two directions: an exploration of the potentialities of the blessed idiot figure and of the holy madman figure, into which the other two categories are collapsed. The blessed idiot figure would mostly be referred to in Russian by the word *blazhenny* (blessed, innocent) and



his/her foolishness would manifest itself as 'an intellectual and physical simplicity and lowliness'. While the holy madman's behaviour is overtly and often aggressively challenging, the blessed idiot is gentle and lacks the vocality of the former.

One of the earliest depictions of the iconography of the holy fool in Russian film was made by a seminal founding figure in Soviet cinema: Sergei Eisenstein. This might at first appear surprising given that his artistic talents were often in the service of Marxist ideology. Even more surprising perhaps, might be that this holy fool should emerge in a film in which Josef Stalin took a keen interest. Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) was commissioned by the Soviet leader as part of a campaign designed to legitimize, by means of recourse to an idealized past, both the centralization of power in his own hands and the terror that he had spread to subdue his own people. The ruthless actions of the sixteenth-century despot, a figure reclaimed as a heroic predecessor to Stalin, were to be justified through the pursuit of a higher national purpose. Whether Eisenstein endeavoured to fulfill Stalin's vision remains highly questionable, for the Soviet authorities had serious reservations regarding the second part of his film (released as a result as late as 1958), and obstructed the realization of a third part. It is not difficult to notice that the narrative line of the film, while in keeping with Stalin's historical version, seems to be constantly undermined by the visual discourse, granting the film a sense of ambiguity.

Before exploring further the appearances of the hagiographic holy fool in Russian cinema, I want to dwell a little further on the significance of what is possibly the figure's first appearance upon the Soviet stage in Eisenstein's film. Eisenstein is well known for his ambivalent relationship with religion. While there is evidence that he was drawn towards mysticism, his attitude was nevertheless anti-clerical and his films often reflect a negative image of the Orthodox Church. In spite of this, however, and especially in *Ivan the Terrible*, we can see an emphasis on ecclesiastical ceremonies and insignia. In Ivan's portrayal religious imagery is often employed as a subtle commentary, subversive of any *prima facie* meaning. On this reading, the appearance of a holy fool becomes less of a surprise in Eisenstein's recreation of the past. Even if it is difficult to establish the historical authenticity of the holy fool that challenged Tsar Ivan IV (1547–84), it is easy to notice the critical role that the holy fools play in relation to official power, and indeed this is the function from which Eisenstein drew. The cultural historian Sergey Ivanov identifies this as one of the elements that enriched the holy fool paradigm when it was translated to medieval Russia from the Byzantine Empire: 'Wherever he may be, the holy fool exposes the artifices of the worldly structures which serve as guarantors of the divine order. In Byzantium this means, primarily, the Church; in Rus the Tsar'. Pitted against a centralised authority represented by the Tsar, the fool establishes himself as his spiritual double and as an alternative pole of power and authority. Priscilla Hunt gives us an insight in how the transgressive



spirituality of the holy fool functioned as a language expressing the tension between the official hierarchical structures of power and the egalitarian aspirations of the community, which the holy fool attempts to bring into balance. During the totalitarian Soviet period of Russian history in the twentieth century, holy foolishness therefore



*Figure 2.1* The image of the warrior saint in the background emphasizes the mission of Eisenstein's holy fool. (*Ivan the Terrible*) offered a subtle but recognisable language of dissent.

Given the privileged relationship with power that the holy fool holds in Russian culture, it is not difficult to see Eisenstein's intentions in employing the holy fool. In a situation where everybody is submitting to Ivan's will, the holy fool is his only subject who sees through his manipulation and dares to reprehend it. Eisenstein manipulates the symbolism of the holy fool's paraphernalia, traditionally interpreted as either ascetic practice or having a prophetic significance. In his enraged remonstrance, Eisenstein's holy fool casts malevolent looks, and makes accusations of witchcraft and coldblooded murder, all the while pulling the chains worn across his naked body in a gesture evoking a proletarian protest as much as a divine mission. It is clear that his revolt cannot be appeased as straightforwardly as if it were the mutiny of a mob. If intended to be read as the embodiment or the survival of a revolutionary spirit, the holy fool levels a particularly powerful critique of Stalin's autocratic tendencies. Whilst drawing on established hagiographic iconography and the traditional understanding of the holy fool as a spiritual pole of power in opposition to the secular power, Eisenstein



manipulates these features to serve his own artistic and political ends. In order to do so he also diverges from the historical chronicles, according to which Ivan held holy fools in high regard and even feared them.

Although it is likely that Eisenstein intended to launch a political critique through his use of the holy fool, any higher spiritual significance is drained out of the figure. Such an appropriation leaves us with both an observation and a question that will prove of consequence in the development of my argument. The observation is that the figure of the holy fool is capable of retaining power over the popular imagination, even in a supposedly materialist Soviet climate. This is in keeping with a more general trend in Russian criticism which sees holy foolishness not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a tool of cultural interpretation. We are left, therefore, with a question about how well the 'canonical' iconography of the holy fool serves the critical function of holy foolishness in cinema. The responses to this question will be linked to an inquiry into how holy foolishness has been culturally reworked, and I will return to both these issues at various points during this chapter.

Eisenstein was far from being the only Russian or Soviet director to use the hagiographic tradition to portray on film the holy fool figure. In the same mode stands Sergei Bondarchuk's rendition of the relationship between another holy fool, possibly nicknamed "Big Cap", and Boris Godunov (1598–1605), who was crowned Tsar within a few years of the death of Ivan the Terrible. Bondarchuk's 1986 film *Boris Godunov* is a grand adaptation of Pushkin's eponymous play. On this reading Boris had not only usurped the legitimate claimant, contriving the death of Ivan's son, but was also responsible for a wave of persecutions triggered by the apparition of a pretender: a monk assuming the identity of the murdered Tsarevich. Bondarchuk, following folk and literary traditions, has the guilt-ridden Tsar confronted by a holy fool Nikolka. He wanders the streets in winter dressed in rags, barefoot, wearing a broken metal helmet on his head and a big cross hanging in a thick chain around his neck. He acts as Godunov's conscience, reminding the Tsar that his request to kill the children who have mocked him and stolen his kopek is very similar to what he himself did to the Tsarevich. The *iurodivyi* not only utters this inconvenient truth to the surprise of the crowds, but also refuses to grant Godunov's request by replying that he will not pray for 'Tsar Herod', which functions as an ominous sign.

A holy fool conceived in the same mould, but this time as a fictional figure rather than a historical one, appears in Elem Klimov's *Agony* (1975). Here we remain in the same iconographic canon but with the difference that historical references are less certain, even if the two protagonists of the film are two important historical figures: Rasputin and Tsar Nicholas II. This film was controversial and only released ten years after production. Against a range of films developing a Russian nationalistic tendency during the 1970s and early 1980s, *Agony* struck a discordant note because of the



balanced, almost positive, treatment of a Tsar struggling against his weak nature to rule the country and counter the negative influence of Rasputin at the imperial court. The holy fool makes a brief appearance. His character is again constructed in opposition to a malefic center of power: a neat and tidy Rasputin, but one all too ready to indulge in debaucheries, is briefly juxtaposed with a filthy, hunchbacked holy fool, wearing heavy metal religious artifacts. The latter's transgressive spirituality is used as a critical device against transgressive immorality. The use of the holy fool here reinforces the enduring power that the iconography of the holy fool held through the Soviet era, yet the scene is given an ambiguity such that the fool's critical function is not wholly positive.

### THE ISLAND (2006)

It is not at all surprising that the post-Soviet era has witnessed a return to the cultural model of the holy fool in all its spiritual significance. The rediscovery of pre-Soviet national identities after 1991 has included a strong appreciation of the Christian Orthodox aspects of that heritage, of which the holy fool represents an idiosyncratic expression. As a result the religious and hagiographic component of holy foolishness has recently started to be fully exploited by Russian directors. Such films include Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov/The Island* which is generally considered to be the first feature film to elaborate on the spiritual model of the hagiographic holy fool to such an extent that it becomes the central concern of the film. Lungin's film was conceived as a response to a new chapter in post-Soviet Russia's ongoing search for identity. At the opening of an interview with the director Lungin, the film critic Andrey Plakhov comments on the symbolic value that the film has for today's Russia: 'Nowadays, more than likely it is considered more important to resolve inner problems—symbolically within the individual, as within the country'. Adopting a traditionalist stance, the whole film is intended as an alternative to the cultural and political discourses that overlook religious hagiography in favour of secular references. The director's acknowledged ambition is to 'open up new genres in film, in this case the genre of the lives of the saints'. The narrative form of *Ostrov* is similar to the pictorial representations of the *vitae* of the saints called *klejma*—a series of images framing the icon and depicting episodes from the life of a saint. Partially independent episodes are welded together to create the multifarious image of the clairvoyant, penitent, prankster, pedagogue and exorcist Father Anatoly. While reinforcing the values held by the Russian Orthodox Church in the continuous debates over national identity, does this fool preserve the characteristics of untamed dissent in relation to authority?

Although the story is set in Soviet times—the 1970s—for most of its length, Lungin utilizes the national emblem of the holy fool in such a fashion that he projects the image of a new spiritual guide for the post-Soviet era. Father Anatoly, the stoker of a monastery situated on an island, is paradoxically both a prankster and a clairvoyant,





only loosely resembling the saints that the script writer Dmitry Sobolev used as prototypes: St Theophilus of Fool-for-Christ of the Kiev Caves (1788–1853) and St Sebastian of Karaganda (1884–1966). Anatoly is depicted interacting with two groups: the lay people who revere him and in whose company he is often seen drinking tea at his small stoker's shed, and the monastic community into which he never completely integrates and whose members he teases permanently. In spite of his spiritual gifts, he bears the secret burden of a murder that he thinks he committed during the Second World War, an assumption which is only disproved at the very end of the film.

The critical functions of Anatoly are in keeping with those of the hagiographical fools. Through his theatricalized behaviour and metaphorical gestures Anatoly acts out the conflicts smouldering within people's own consciences and present in their relations with their neighbours. Anatoly assumes the status of an outsider: he has the lowest position in the monastic hierarchy because he has refused to take the habit and is in charge of the dirtiest place there as a simple fire stoker. He enjoys being marginalized for his theatrical and irreverent behaviour towards the other monks and the religious services. Yet his centrality is of a spiritual order: on a symbolic level he keeps alight the spiritual fire for the whole monastery. He is endowed with divine awareness and discernment of spirits, acting as a reflector and revealer of the monks' inner conflicts. His behaviour is metaphorical—his cleverly designed practical jokes are meant to redirect people's scrutiny towards themselves and point out their warring spiritual attitudes in an attempt to ease their troubled consciousness and unify their torn interiority.

Anatoly's unconventional behaviour and his profound penitential religiosity place him in stark contrast not only to the state's materialistic ideology but also to the formalism often practiced in the monastery. This positioning heightens his critical function against the norms of society and the Church. In this sense we witness a "folly within folly": an uncompromising immoderation within, as it were, what John Saward calls the monastic "counterculture". A few episodes stand out as particularly revealing. Having heard of the healing powers of Anatoly, a mother brings her lame son to the island, as a last hope after the doctors have given up. She is a white collar worker very fond of her job. Anatoly cures her son but advises her to allow the child to receive communion the following day. She is extremely fearful and tearful that she is going to lose her job if she does not return to work the next day and so she decides not to wait. Anatoly has to snatch the boy from the returning boat and dismisses her anxiety using his clairvoyant abilities to assure her that all will be well. The critical suggestion is that fear of losing material possessions causes people to become enslaved to social systems and willingly sacrifice their freedom of mind. She is convinced that her boy cannot walk after Anatoly prays for him, even if she arrived with the hope that he would. Even the boy, after taking a first few steps by himself, returns fearfully to his crutches and needs

to be reassured that he no longer needs them. The woman and the boy cannot envisage a situation that contravenes the experiences of their material world. If there is no explicit criticism of the recent Soviet regime, Lungin points to a mode of being in the world which becomes automatically subversive to any totalitarian system, this happening when people retain an independence of mind and preserve their own freedom of action at any cost. Control is often not achieved in a violent manner, Lungin



*Figure 2.2* Anatoly trying the coffin made by Job and prophesizing that his end is drawing near. (*The Island*)

suggests, but insidiously through the uncritical acceptance of norms and conventions that come to regulate the mind.

In another, darkly humorous, episode in *Ostrov*, Lungin deliberately creates a situation where the abbot, Filaret, realises he is attached to worldly possessions and completely unprepared for death. Filaret's comfortable boots are burned and his favorite blanket is thrown into a lake, exposing the inconsistency between such self-indulging practices and his former ascetic ideals. Moreover, the fact that the boots were a gift from a bishop alludes to the Church's worldly accommodation and spiritual slackness at a time when it was assuming a subservient position towards the Soviet state. In another series of episodes Job, the treasurer of the monastery, is constantly reminded of his envious nature, especially towards Anatoly's charismatic gifts and of his hostile attitude, through a reference to the killing of Abel. The implication is that, frustrated in his search for vainglory, Job's envy and anger is a sort of killing, in intention if not in deed. Anatoly benignly makes fun of Job's obsession with cleanliness in order to show it for what it is: an attempt to hide those passions that have come to rule him. At the same time there is a subtext with broader implications. What appears to be Job's malign inclinations—his



obsession with cleanliness and his spying and informing on Anatoly in order to ingratiate himself with the abbot—all allude to practices that characterized the paranoia of Soviet society at large. As part of the process of purging society from elements inimical or not conforming to the Soviet ethos, the informants, recruited from all strata of society, played an important role.

Besides those elements which Lungin uses to ensure that his audience identifies Anatoly as a holy fool—the use of antics to deliver his prophecies and uncover the inner truth of his fellow beings, as well as his feigned madness—the story has a strong psychological ingredient. Due to this emphasis, *The Island* offers a new development away from the narrative usage of the holy fool. If, in previous Russian films, the holy fool ran the risk of becoming a symbol frozen in traditional patterns, used episodically to create a relation between two opposed poles of authority, in *The Island* the holy fool is no longer subordinate to the narrative but is explored as a protagonist in his own right. In parallel with various playful episodes the camera takes the viewer into the private moments of man's daily torment whereby he (falsely) believes that he cowardly took the life of his commander in World War II. In the most idiosyncratic Russian tradition the model of the holy fool is conflated with the sinner-turned-into-saint motif.

By doing so, Pavel Lungin achieves something that the traditional model of the hagiographic holy fool never attempted: he opens the door to an understanding of holy foolishness as a potentially viable alternative for everyone. In his rendition the radical quality that holy foolishness has acquired in Russian hagiography is 'tamed' by the director's attempt to illustrate some of the most cherished Orthodox spiritual and penitential practices. The element of scandal and controversy that usually accompanies the life of the holy fool is underplayed. This is because the viewer familiar with Orthodox spirituality can recognize the protagonist as a holy fool as well as gaining insights into his inner life of prayer and penitence at an early stage in the story: the fool's eccentricities are then easily interpreted in this key. Moreover, Father Anatoly is at times invested with the role of a *staretz* or spiritual father. This diminishes that otherworldly quality of the holy fool normally achieved through his/her loneliness and mysteriousness. As a consequence, the challenge posed to the viewer is also diminished; rather than overturning common religious assumptions there is a sense in which the viewer's expectations are met, particularly in a Russian context where Orthodox culture is dominant.

### **IURODSTVOVANIE OR PLAYING THE HOLY FOOL**

The practice of holy foolishness in its customary guise presupposes an element of acting, at least in the Byzantine-Russian tradition where foolishness is understood to be a mask designed to conceal the sanctity of its practitioner. In this context, the real



holy fool is ultimately saved from accusations of imposture by the authenticity of his/her existential commitment to the role. However, this was not always the case. In order to account for cases of appropriation of foolish behaviour in Russian film for different purposes the term at hand is *iurodstvovanie*. To the best of my knowledge this idea is indicated by a special term unique to Russian culture, where it has been recognized as a distinct behavioural pattern having formal qualities of holy foolishness but lacking its substance.

Pavel Lungin offers an ample analysis of this practice in his *The Tsar* (2009), where it is combined with Ivan the Terrible's personal mythology of kingship. Here the figure of the historical fool who castigates Ivan the Terrible is suppressed while the Tsar himself is conceived as a sort of holy fool in reverse, an alleged latter-day saint figure disguised in imperial clothes. He is shown adopting for himself something of the awesome character of some Russian holy fools whose mysterious behaviour and acts—sometimes apparently cruel—were deemed to be beyond human understanding or at least having a hidden significance at odds with the *prima facie* interpretation of the facts. It is the coincidence of oppositional elements that underlies the construction of the holy fool and which makes the figure translatable to contexts that lack a positive spiritual significance. In the political sphere the appropriation of the holy fool's behaviour can become the basis for despotism, sanctioning any action of the sovereign.

The film opens in the year 1565 and the *oprichnina*, Ivan's political police, are killing people and devastating villages. One girl, Masha, escapes and is saved from freezing by the abbot Fillip. Shortly afterwards Ivan asks the abbot to become the new Metropolitan (titular head) of the Church. Fillip's nephew, Kolychev, leaves to fight in the Livonian war. He returns defeated and as a result Ivan considers him a traitor and orders him to be arrested. Kolychev flees to Fillip who hides him, although the abbot then also falls under suspicion. Eventually, Ivan finds Kolychev and orders Fillip to judge him and his fellow fugitives. The Metropolitan refuses to condemn them in spite of the fact that they recognize their guilt, since he suspects that their confessions were made under torture. Ivan sends the accused to fight a bear, whereby Kolychev is miraculously saved by the same orphaned girl, Masha, holding the icon of Our Lady of Vladimir. Unfortunately, such salvation is only temporary as Ivan orders Kolychev to be cruelly tortured in the public square under the eyes of his uncle. For his refusal to condemn his nephew, the Metropolitan is dismissed by the Tsar and imprisoned. However, rumours of the Metropolitan's sanctity and miracle-working capacity are spread and so the film ends with a vengeful Ivan having him killed.

Lungin shows the feeling of an impending apocalypse to be the motivation for Ivan's irrational behaviour. His acts are justified to himself and to his subjects by the perceived imminence of the second coming of Christ. Ivan's religious mania can be explained by his transformation of general apocalyptic expectations into his own



mission. He assumes this mission which at the same time serves his own political interests and ambitions. In so doing, Ivan conceives himself as the apocalyptic forerunner of Christ. Two episodes in particular stand out. In the first the Tsar explains to Masha, taken away from Metropolitan Phillip and placed under his protection, that he had built his palace Alexandrovskaja Sloboda as a New Jerusalem with the coming of Christ in mind. In the second, Lungin depicts a religious cleansing ceremony in which the royal cart is pulled by virgins dressed in white, in a reenactment of Matthew 25:1–13. In Ivan's mind it is his mission to purge everything before the second coming, administering the justice of God as His earthly representative. The Tsar's predilection for the orphaned girl whose parents had been killed by his own men is another way of distancing himself from the sinners and associating himself with the unblemished. Masha is here portrayed as a *blazhennaya*, a blessed innocent, and Ivan's polar opposite.

It can be observed that Lungin's approach to the historical subject is peculiarly modern. In contrast with sixteenth century ideology which promoted the figures of the holy fool and the Tsar as beyond good and evil, Lungin deliberately presents Ivan as a fool without either sanctity or charisma. Lungin is playing with the difference between appearance and essence that is characteristic of the fool. The model of the holy fool was meant to convey the idea that under the mask of madness sanctity could be concealed. In the same way, Ivan projects an image of himself as a bloody tyrant in appearance while in secret he is an ascetic. In the privacy of his residence at Alexandrovskaja Sloboda, he is shown in his cell wearing monastic garments, praying in front of his icons or publicly performing a ritual of repentance in front of the altar together with his personal guard, the *oprichniki*. By casting Pyotr Mamonov, who played the holy fool in *Ostrov*, in the role of Ivan, Lungin inspiringly uses the ascetical face of this actor to make a point to the audience. In his twisted way, Ivan expiates for the sins of his people and expects the unconditional support of his subjects. He reads historical events as God's responses to behaviour on earth, rewarding or punishing depending on people's religious devotion. On this conception, suffering becomes doubly justifiable: on the one hand it is the result of the sins of the people, on the other it is also intended as a means of purification. Therefore, the suffering that Ivan inflicts on his own people has in his view a redemptive character, the ultimate aim being to attract God's benevolence for his military campaigns and create the necessary conditions for the second coming of Christ. In an inversion of the traditional hagiographic fool, religion and politics here reinforce each other to create the mythology of Tsar Ivan the Terrible as defender of the faith.

I have previously suggested that there is a risk that proliferation of a certain phenomenon in a culture can cause it to lose its freshness and unpredictability. As Juri Lotman observes, through repetition and imitation even an extraordinary act can fall from the sphere of 'explosion', that is creativity, into the sphere of the habitual. In this



section I have showed how the traditional hagiographic fool, now undergoing a revival of interest in Russian culture, can be appropriated and made to serve purposes that contravene its very *raison d'être*. In so doing, the viewer's familiarity with the holy fool figure can also cause it to lose much of its critical weight: a problem which is more acute in Russian culture today than it ever was under the Soviet period where the figure, although stripped of much of its Christian content, remained a powerful countercultural critical force. To understand the strength of this critical power we need to explore more thoroughly these stylized holy fools in Soviet cinema.

### **STYLIZED HOLY FOOLS**

Under the Soviet Union, it was often difficult to express overtly religious content in film, and so directors often used the *iurodivyi* in a stylized form. In many ways, these stylized fools retained pointers that linked them with the functions of the traditional holy fool in Russian culture, most importantly their critical function. As with those holy fools that use explicitly hagiographic models, these derivatives have also led to some conceptual reworking of the holy fool paradigm, and have survived as important models in post-Soviet Russian cinema. Although their depiction departs from the 'canonical' iconography, the identification of these stylized figures as holy fools is reliant on literary precedents in Russian culture and similarity of function. These reworkings of the hagiographic paradigm have been facilitated by the fact that holy foolishness has functioned in Russia not only as a theological category, but also as a mode of popular religiosity. Probably the first such explorations into the spirituality of the holy fool are Dostoevsky's characters Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* (1868) or Elizaveta in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), figures to which many of the cinematic fools are indebted. Thereafter, the door was opened to a gallery of cultural interpretations, which Ewa Thompson calls 'stylized holy fools' in order to differentiate them from their more strictly hagiographic counterparts.

### **WARTIME ROMANCE (1983)**

The development of stylized holy fools was particularly strong in the 1980s as the Soviet system began to face serious questioning from within. One of the most notable instances of a stylized holy fool is evident in Pyotr Todorovsky's *Wartime Romance*. In the first part Alexander is a World War II soldier platonically attracted by Liuba, the mistress of a major who is killed in action. When they meet again after ten years, Alexander is a film projectionist studying to become a history teacher and already married. Liuba, now a worn-out street vendor, has a daughter. Alexander does everything in his power to help her, including selling her doughnuts for her and babysitting her daughter. Alexander's love for Liuba has a nonphysical dimension, and



his self-debasement as well as the risks he runs of losing his wife, friends and social position are ways of sharing in her misfortune. His mission is to help Liuba rediscover herself as a valuable and beautiful human being troubled by unfortunate circumstances. In one suggestive scene, he is projecting a Chaplin film in the cinema. The hint is apparent: Alexander has now become the Tramp, the character that Chaplin himself came to be identified with. On a symbolic level, it reinforces Alexander's depiction as a holy fool, in spite of the lack of references to religion. The social behavioural model is rooted not in the ethos of the new Soviet man but in the pre-revolutionary 'kenotic' model of the Slavophiles, who cherished the ideals of humility, self-limitation, suffering and poverty. At the time when *Wartime Romance* was filmed, the ideas of humility and willingly sharing in the suffering of others could not have been more at odds with the official Soviet aesthetic whose three supporting pillars were 'ideological commitment', 'Party-mindedness' and 'national/popular spirit'. This meant that films were supposed to contribute militantly to uncovering the communist 'idea' and oppose cosmopolitanism and bourgeois nationalism. Neither was *Wartime Romance* in line with the heroic male paradigm of the Soviet mythology. Under such circumstances, a subtle approach had to be used if one was to challenge these state-sponsored ideals. Todorovksy demonstrated that an alternative model of man could be promoted in a disguised form through the fool figure, masking his subversive criticism through the means of an unpretentious comedy.

### **REPENTANCE (1984)**

With filmmakers dependent upon state sponsorship during the Soviet era, and suffering under a regime of strict censorship, it was unlikely that any overt criticism of the regime could be expressed in cinema. The advent of glasnost in the 1980s saw a mild relaxation of censorship that emboldened a more critical spirit. It was in this climate that a film emerged that questioned the recent Soviet past and authoritarianism (though it is notable it appeared at the periphery of the Soviet Union, far from the central bureaucracy). The Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze produced *Repentance* for Georgian television in 1984 and received political support from the local Party Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze, although the controversial nature of the film prevented its broadcast until 1986. It was seen by Gorbachev during the same year, who, very much impressed, personally made it possible for the film to be widely distributed and enter public debate. *Repentance* thereafter became a cult film of the 1980s and notable as the first to address directly the horrors of the Stalinist regime and, in the words of a Russian film critic, 'satisfy our tremendous thirst for truth and our urge to reevaluate the mistakes of the recent past'.

The whole of Soviet society recognized its own traumatic past in Abuladze's political parable, and even its surrealism was deemed perfectly suited to describe



accurately the show trials and mentality of the Great Stalinist Terror. At the same time, Georgians saw the film as specifically promoting their own nationalist cause and customs. In spite of this, the film was originally designed to have universal value. It is set in an imaginary time and space—contemporary at first sight but with anachronistic elements such as police forces dressed in medieval outfits and horse carriages—and was meant to undermine the viewer's instinct to establish a particular timeframe. The figure around which the narrative is woven is not a specific historical individual but the 'universal dictator'—a composite caricature of Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Beria and Chaplin's 'great dictator'. In addition, the character's histrionic side brings him close to Caligula and Nero. It was in this context that Abuladze made use of the holy fool figure to maximum critical effect.

*Repentance* exhibits an intricate construction *en abîme*, with two framing narratives, one real and circular, and the other imaginary, with its own fantasies and flashbacks. The story is narrated from the point of view of Ketevan Barateli, a cake decorator now in her forties who, in the first sequence, is seen finding out from the newspaper that the mayor Varlam Aravidze has died. This sets in motion her daydream, and all that follows happens in her subjective time with the exception of the final sequence. In her reverie Ketevan imagines herself as the defiant woman who digs out the body of Aravidze, is caught and brought to court where she gives her own version of the real character of the much-esteemed mayor. The flashbacks to her childhood years offer a complex portrayal of Aravidze as father, unscrupulous lover, corrupted leader, dilettante patron of arts and capricious dictator. Most of all he is shown in relation to her own family, as a persecutor of her parents, the painter Sandro Barateli and his wife Nino. They stand up for the old values of art and spirituality which the materialist Aravidze wants to destroy while keeping up the appearances of an enlightened leader. They are ultimately eliminated from the absurd world that Aravidze turns his town into, where 'four out of three persons are enemies'. Ketevan has thus a personal reason for digging him out because 'to bury him means to forgive him'. Her unexpected ally is his own grandson, Tornike, who cannot bear the lies and hypocrisy of his father and grandfather. Only Tornike's suicide makes his father Abel decide to dig out and throw Varlam's corpse into the sea.

It is in his characterization of Aravidze that Abuladze utilizes the trope of *iurodstvovanie* to such great effect. Each different angle from which he is shown uncovers not a facet of his personality but rather a new mask since Aravidze lacks a stable identity. On his first encounter with the Baratelis his costume suggests the ambiguity of his character: he wears a white gown over a black uniform. On the one hand Aravidze seems to be sympathetic to Sandro, his art and his desire to save the town church from destruction, and is full of admiration for Nino's beauty, while on the other hand his antics are meant to intimidate and have a symbolic subtext. When he



visits the Baratelis his gift for Ketevan is a caged bird: an ominous sign of future imprisonments. His recital of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 66* on the same occasion, touching on the desecration of faith, honour and virtue, and 'art made tongue-tied by authority', is actually used as a riddle to foretell the ordeals that Sandro and his family will soon undergo. In the end the mask falls, revealing that the benevolent patron of the artists and art is nothing of the sort, instead he is all consumed by the desire to protect society from what he deems to be corrupting principles.

While Aravidze proves to be the unholy fool, Ketevan emerges as the true holy fool. This is not a case of cultural appropriation. In Georgia, as in Russia, the practice of holy foolishness came to be known quite early—already in eleventh century the life of Andrew the Fool circulated in Georgian translation. Abuladze utilizes two *topoi* of holy foolishness: sacrilegious behaviour and symbolic gestures. Apparently Ketevan's digging up a corpse is a sacrilegious gesture, a personal vendetta. As the procurator points out it would be a case of believing that one can achieve a moral good through immoral behaviour. While her acts are objectionable on moral grounds, there is still a higher reason that takes precedence over moral prescriptions 'for Aravidze is not dead. As long as you defend him, he lives on and corrupts society'. Aravidze is not dead because he lives in the collective memory as a great man, the benefactor of his town. Ketevan's gesture is symbolic because the town has to confront its demons and call them by their real name. Abel's attitude is revealing of the refusal to pass any judgment on his father and on the past because 'those were complicated times'. But the danger is that by not incriminating the perpetrator for his crimes, the past continues to live on insidiously through the living and repeats itself through their attitudes and assumptions. This is true of Abel who is Aravidze with a human face. While his father was demonic and obliterated his enemies, he merely lacks moral criteria and prefers, as in the case of Ketevan, to send his enemies to the mental asylum. Ketevan's pronounced madness is saner than the unreasonability that passes as normality, but the system has now found milder forms of dealing with inconvenient truths, more suitable for the post-Stalinist generation.

In fact, what is left for the holy fool once old values have been obliterated and the people have been given new consciences? Abuladze suggests that the function of the fool is to keep alive the memory of the past, particularly a past that has been rewritten. Churches can be demolished but their memory should be kept alive, Ketevan seems to tell us through each cake which she symbolically decorates with a church. This had profound meaning for a society finding itself at a turning point in the 1980s. In this context the last line of the film must have sounded even more resonant to its Soviet audience: 'What good is [a street] if it doesn't lead to a church?' For Soviet cinema the film marked symbolically a moment of liberation from the censorship that had previously been imposed on religion.

### **KEROSENE SELLER'S WIFE (1989)**

Alexander Kaidanovsky's *Kerosene Seller's Wife* raises similar issues to Abuladze's film. Set in Kaliningrad in 1953, *Kerosene Seller's Wife* is another glasnost film designed to revisit and critique the Stalinist past. The narrative line, punctuated with Christian symbolism and grotesque allegory verging on the surreal, features a Cain-and-Abel case in which a corrupted high rank Communist official, Sergey, deliberately provoked the death of a patient, for which his twin brother Pavel, took the blame. As a result Pavel, once a prestigious surgeon, has been demoted and is reduced to becoming a kerosene seller. He rises to the stature of a holy fool by assuming the injustices of social exclusion and destitution, which brings him closer to the outcasts of the community. His self-abnegation is designed to rack Sergey's conscience, which unfortunately never happens as he prefers to drown himself rather than renege on his Stalinist principles. The truth is only brought to light by an investigation into accusations of bribery-taking which a priest and his community have brought against Sergey, as a result of which Pavel tries unsuccessfully to take upon himself the blame for his brother's criminal activities for a second time.

That the director fashions Pavel as a holy fool is not only suggested by his having previously played the role of another fool in Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, but is clearly indicated by his wife in the film who explicitly calls him a *iurodivyi*. Kaidanovsky's purpose is to contrast Sergey's ascension up the political hierarchy with his brother's utter degradation. Even the film's title undermines Pavel's status by bringing his relatively unimportant wife to the fore. Under Kaidanovsky's direction the behaviour of holy folly is employed to extreme effects, with grotesque images of Pavel in his repugnant fur coat crawling like a beast across the ice and mumbling indistinctly as a kind of mortification or atonement for his brother's deeds. As the priest's defeatist motto says, echoed by the police investigator himself, 'Victory is the refuge of the villain', which seems to be embraced by Pavel as well. Kaidanovsky's naturalistic use of the aesthetics of holy foolishness offers a sharp social criticism rather than moments of transcendence. The truth the investigator discovers cannot bring any relief to the victim since evil is endemic in society. In contrast, the truth Pavel seeks is shown to reside not in the external circumstances of 'who did it', but in the miraculous personal conversion of the criminal. 'I'm convinced that without the hope of a miracle life would lose its reality', Pavel tells the investigator. The miracle of Sergey's repentance and salvation never takes place since he has irremediably lost his soul in exchange for the honours granted to him by the Soviet regime. Only the police investigator is touched by fleeting visions of transcendence inspired by the presence of the priest and members of his community, but nevertheless he still decides to cover up the facts.



In keeping with his marginalized status, Pavel speaks very little all through the film with one exception, when the investigator is writing his final report at the police station. Like a prophet of doom, Pavel, in a trance-like state, launches a final diatribe against a society where spiritual death reigns supreme and the present regime, keeping the phantoms of the past alive in monumental art, is condemned by divine judgment. As Pavel continues his monologue the camera zooms in while his face changes dramatically to express the horror of this spiritual death of which society is unaware. Cutting to a blank red frame, the face of Sergey then bursts into the sequence to engage Pavel in a dialogue about the meaning of immortality. For Sergey immortality means being present through propagandist art as a repository of collective memory. Pavel replies by criticizing the way in which moral conscience and personal memory are erased in order to stifle any attempts to redeem the present. He asks: 'Who is guiltier than he who turns aside when he is told the truth or forgets crimes he himself has committed?' The present cannot be changed as long as it is populated by the dead and there is no acceptance of moral responsibility. In the film Pavel refers to the post-Stalinist present but the question of the quality of personal and collective memory that he raises is as relevant for the period of transition that glasnost represented. The same issue of personal and collective repentance that is central to Abuladze's film is raised in a different form here.

At the conclusion of his film, Kaidanovsky enhances Pavel's isolation on the fringes of society by placing him in a mental asylum where he is leader of the inmates. It is unclear whether this is the result of successful brainwashing or Pavel's realization that greater humanity is to be found within the asylum's walls than outside. Pavel ends by pounding exploding caps with a brick while church bells are heard in the distance: a measure through which Kaidanovsky enhances his protagonist's destitution. In a culture where holy foolishness was still alive in collective memory one could not fail to make relevant associations. Pavel is reminiscent of the historical holy fool Ivan Iakovlevich Koreisha (1780–1861) who spent much time in the mental institution to which he had been committed. It is also a direct allusion to the communist practice of institutionalizing 'enemies' of the regime on the grounds of insanity. It is significant that from the 1950s the number of the asylums in the Soviet Union ballooned from 40 to over 400. This was in line with a more general interpretation of madness seen 'in relation of opposition to social and political institutions regulating the human mind, which become internalized as prevailing cultural assumptions'. Through his use of Pavel as a stylized holy fool in a mental hospital, Kaidanovsky questioned the norms and fundamentals of a society that required the depersonalization of the human being in order to function. The critical force of his character enabled a trenchant distinction to be offered between self-denial as the last defence of humanity and the depersonalization practiced in totalitarian regimes.

### ***RUSSIAN SYMPHONY (1994)***

With the fall of the Soviet Union, stylized holy fools could begin to be explored in a specifically religious way in Russian cinema. One of the most striking examples is Konstantin Lopushansky's grim picture of a man who, realizing his own ungodliness, takes up holy foolishness as penitence. Lopushansky inherited from Tarkovsky the feeling of an impending apocalypse, a theme that became his main focus in four films: *Russian Symphony* (1994), *Letters from a Dead Man* (1986), *Visitor to a Museum* (1989) and *The Black Swans* (2006). Of these four, only in *Russian Symphony* is the apocalyptic vision specifically religious. The viewer is introduced into this atmosphere from the first lines of the protagonist's monologue in which he ruminates on the idea of God's judgment of history and on the last invisible battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The protagonist Ivan Masarin is, by his own definition, 'a Russian intellectual', an 'heir of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky', given to continuous introspection, who is drawn into action by the gravity of the events. He makes it his mission to rescue the children in an orphanage that is going to be engulfed by floodwaters. Soon he realizes that the authorities are not going to help him as the Soviet empire is collapsing and they are preoccupied with saving themselves. The signs of the last days become manifest as the dead seem to emerge out of their graves in grotesque scenes. The only person he can find who is sympathetic to his intentions is a writer who calls Masarin a 'Myshkin' in reference to Dostoevsky's fool. But the writer proves only to be interested in the children's story as subject matter for a good novel and Masarin is no real Myshkin. Masarin realises that he actually feels no compassion for the children and it is only his mind that tells him the children must be saved. In a discussion with the writer Masarin explains his conception of life as a continuous role-play. Some play better than others but one player will be an impostor—the Antichrist. As the film progresses the faithful brace for the last battle and travel to Kulikovo, the site of an historical battle between the Russians and the Tartars. While they are waiting for the enemy, a dwarfish holy fool puts his ear to the ground to hear the Antichrist's coming. Masarin reappears now totally transformed into a stiff, self-important politician and tries to reassure the people that the children need nothing; they just should learn how to swim and save themselves. As he ends a storm breaks out, which brings forth chaos.

In many ways *Russian Symphony* completes its representation of holy foolishness where Lungin's *The Island* begins. Its final part follows the process of the protagonist becoming a holy fool. Masarin admits to himself that his logically thought out solution for the plight of the orphans makes him a murderer. He dreams of himself being dead and of an angel who cannot find clean shirts for him because his soul is not clean. Finally, Masarin realizes that the only important question in life concerns God. The last sequence is a long shot of him plodding on his knees in the snow, dressed in rags, with a giant cross hanging on a thick chain around his neck all the while begging



God for forgiveness. More than any other holy fool explored so far, Lopushanky's has a critical function to expose the inner problems of the soul. Empires can fall but, the director suggests, this split in human psychology between the mind and the heart can endure with fatal consequences.

The understanding of this dramatic change in the character hinges on a specific anthropological view of the human person which experiences a kind of dualism between the mind and the heart. Masarin's recurring statement that he is an 'intellectual', and his permanent introspection, are relevant for the subsequent development of events. Eschatological preoccupations played a significant role in shaping the thinking of Slavophile intellectuals in the nineteenth century and thereafter. Lopushansky draws his inspiration from this religious and philosophic tradition and shows the way this should be embodied. He makes clear that the idea about the eschatological sense of history and the type of action it entails should be rooted in a kind of spirituality capable of bringing the two into an organic unity. As Berdyaev summarises an ancient tenet of Orthodox spirituality: 'It is the mysticism of the heart which is at the centre of life. Therefore the mind must be united to the heart



*Figure 2.3* Masarin's crawling as a penitent in the snow. (*Russian Symphony*)



if there is to be any spiritual unity within'. Otherwise the non-coincidence between the two is perceived internally as role-playing. The film enters into dialogue with Berdyaev's conception of personality as both a persona—a mask which ascribes a social role—and as capacity for communion. It is the latter aspect that is deficient in Masarin, his heart lacking the capacity to feel and bond with the children in need. Holy foolishness is employed here as a means to humble the mind and bring it under the control of the heart.

### ***THE HOUSE OF FOOLS (2002)***

Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dom Durakov/The House of Fools* (2002) offers yet another cultural transfiguration of the holy fool in the flourishing cinematic revival of the post-Soviet era. Its director co-scripted *Andrei Rublev* with Tarkovsky and his reworking of the theme of holy foolishness is, therefore, of great interest. He even establishes an arch in time between the female fools in each film, alluding to *Andrei Rublev's durochka* through the use of the same insignia that came to be temporarily associated with both: the white outfit and horse. Anticipating my analysis of Tarkovsky in the next chapter, I should just note here that both depict female holy fools in conflicts where they seem to position themselves on the wrong side as a result of an apparent error or lack of judgment.

*The House of Fools* is a personal approach towards the recent armed conflict in Chechnya, a subject on which the director was criticized in Russia for his impartiality. Konchalovsky had the diplomatic objective of making a film that aimed to alleviate the war wounds on both sides of the conflict— Russian and Chechen—a motive inspired by his pacifist spirit. Foolishness informs the vision of this film which is chiefly set in a mental institution in the Russian border state of Ingushetia, and becomes an extended metaphor that inquires into the rationale for the war. But in spite of its poetic quality and the luminous figure of Janna, the film's holy fool, the view of the war is gloomy. What is it that puts the machine of war into action in *The House of Fools*? The justification for it loses any relevance and the only answers that the film seems to offer are those involving irrationality. Otherwise the treatment of both the Russian and the Chechen soldiers reveals a human nature that is not altogether corrupted and unredeemable. A trace of human solidarity can be spotted in an episode in which the Russian soldiers want to exchange ammunition and the body of a Chechen for drugs and money. A possibility of bonding is affirmed between the two enemy captains when the Russian one discovers that the Chechen saved him in the Afghanistan war, a potential bond thereafter eliminated by the accidental shooting of the Chechen by a drugged Russian soldier.

The film has a number of different agendas, revealing the shapes that modern warfare can take. The metaphor of holy foolishness is used both to unmask political

and institutionalized repression and to question the boundaries between madness and sanity. The film allows two contrasts: first, between the institutionalized world of madness and the outside world, in order to expose the radical opposition between the humane madness of the incarcerated and the inhuman one of the free people; and second between different types of foolishness. Most of these types of folly have a rather benign form, more like idiosyncrasies that contribute to the individualization of each patient. This picturesque world poses a challenge to what normality is and to what is generally deemed as reasonable. It reunites a gallery of odd figures, whose political views deviate from those generally held, or whose peculiarities contradict normal social conduct.

The film would have been reduced to two political targets—pleading for the right to be different and the unmasking of institutional repression—if it were not for the remarkable character of Janna, who stands out through her deep humanity and non-violent nature. No clear reason is presented for her institutionalization in the asylum except perhaps for her romantic fantasies in which Brian Adams plays the role of her fiancé. For Janna the hospital is not a repressive space but a place where she can place herself in the service of the others. Her freedom is no longer coerced by



*Figure 2.4* Janna playing her accordion surrounded by explosions. (*House of Fools*) conventionally restricted spaces. On a symbolic level she is fashioned in the mould of a modern holy fool. She remains faithful to her fantasy fiancé, in a manner similar to that of mystical love. In the midst of a mad world the melodic sound of her accordion playing gives us hints of an alternative world, while reminding us that ‘We are alive because someone loves us’. She also encounters an extraordinary mysterious presence: an aged patient who thinks he is God. Handed an apple he imagines it to be the planet and refuses to consume it in spite of its inhabitants hopelessly ‘loving and destroying

each other for generations and dying.

Janna's resemblance to the traditional holy fool is reinforced by Konchalovsky's use of the common *topos* of the fool as an object of ridicule. Janna courts ridicule when she accepts the mock proposal of marriage from a Chechen soldier, Ahmed. Her clownish make-up and her clumsy dancing underline the disparity between her and the world. It is her innocent trust in the inherent goodness of human nature that ultimately convinces Ahmed to admit the insanity of his own world and the need for cure and salvation: 'I'm sick. I need to be treated.' Through her apparent folly she provides a more compelling argument for peace to Ahmed than could have been achieved through a lifetime of reasoning.

### **WARD NO 6 (2009)**

The revival of the trope of holy foolishness continues to flourish in Russian filmmaking. Russia's 2010 entry for the American Academy Awards' Best Foreign Film was Karen Shakhnazarov's and Aleksandr Gornovsky's *Ward no 6*: an adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's classic story. The formal qualities of the film contribute to the modern appearance of this screen adaptation of a Russian literary classic and suggest a renewed preoccupation with nineteenth century issues, chiefly with the theme of madness-foolishness as a form of higher perception. The film highlights foolishness in a pseudodocumentary style using fixed frames, a hand-held camera and silent home video recording, which contribute, together with the use of real inmates for the extras, to the blurring of the line between fiction and reality. Gogol's short story on which the film is based was interpreted at the time of its publishing (1892) as a political allegory about the state's repressive structures, equating the madhouse, incidentally a former monastery, with a prison and ultimately with Russia itself.

The tone of the story is that of a polemic, prompted by the ideological confrontation between the psychiatrist Ragin, and his patient Gromov, personifications of passivism and activism on the one hand and of atheism and faith on the other. The film is faithful to Gogol's work but, relocating the action to the present day, makes it explicit from the outset that Ragin believes the mentally deranged Gromov to be a prophet. We see Ragin's growing intellectual attraction towards Gromov in spite of the disapproval of the other doctors who question his purpose and methods. Ragin supports a fatalistic acceptance of one's fate as dictated by the system, devoid of any logic and morality, and even if he accepts that progress can be made theoretically, he claims the human condition will essentially remain tragic. Gromov foresees an era in which justice will prevail, his optimistic view being predicated on the premise of the existence of God and mankind's immortality. Humanity's progress, however envisioned, cannot solve the tragic condition of human mortality—this is a point on which the two agree.



*Figure 2.5* Ragin is locked up as a mental patient. (*Ward no. 6*)

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

The above analysis of the holy fool in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian cinema has revealed the versatility of the figure as a critical device for filmmakers. Two key models are used. The first, and rarer, representation is the holy fool cast in the traditional hagiographical mould. In the Soviet era such representations were limited to historically located films, but in the post-Soviet era when it has been permissible to use overtly religious representation, the figure has been revived, most notably in the portrayal of Father Anatoly in Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov*. Anatoly's critical function goes here hand in hand with the role of spiritual guide, with the result that a call to reform our inner life becomes the main focus. This spiritual project is shown to be at odds with both the contemporary religious practice and the state ideology. In contrast with the hagiography-based figures, the stylised cinematic re-interpretations of the holy fool in Russian cinema have proved more powerful in their critical message and more



imaginative in both form and content. As expected, in Soviet cinema the representations are few and do not bear explicit spiritual meaning and their critical force is limited. Once more favorable conditions arrived in the era of glasnost, representations of holy foolishness increased and began to manifest historic awareness. They were used as vehicle of criticism, particularly in connection to the Stalinist period, but due to their metaphorical language had the potential to express general truths. The post-Soviet Russian cinema, with somewhat more freedom from political censorship, has voiced concerns with the present social and political situation in the country. Thus, the holy fool figure has been employed as a means of exploring eschatological ideas and expressing concerns about state-supported repression and war. There was one director, however, who more than any other transcended the traditional boundaries of holy foolishness in the Russian context, and it is his work that we shall now explore.



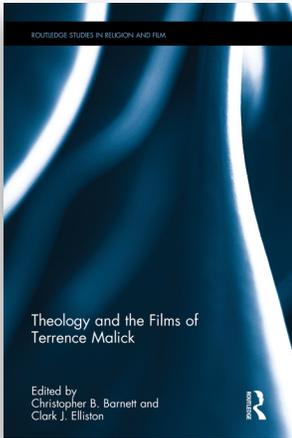


CHAPTER

4

# An Improbable Career: The Films of Terrence Malick

# An Improbable Career: The Films of Terrence Malick



The following is excerpted from *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* edited by Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston. © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

To purchase a copy, [click here](#).

In July 1958, French critic and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard wrote in the film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*:

There are five or six films in cinematic history one would like to review with these words alone: “This is the most beautiful film!” For there is no higher praise. Films like Murnau/Flaherty’s *Taboo*, Rossellini’s *A Voyage to Italy*, and Claude Renoir’s *The Golden Coach* require no lengthy discourses. Like starfish opening and closing, they know how to open, then conceal the secrets of a world they alone possess and at the same time fascinatingly reflect. Theirs is the only truth. It is deeply embedded in them, even though it is constantly exposed to the world on the silver screen.

The subject of Godard’s essay was the great Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, who at the time had already directed nineteen films, but his words would just as well apply to the films of Terrence Malick. Malick’s body of work—which at this point includes seven narrative feature films with several more currently in production—demands multiple viewings, and while Godard might argue that his films, such as *Taboo*, *A Voyage to Italy*, and *The Golden Coach*, speak for themselves and therefore “[require] no lengthy discourses,” the many secrets in Malick’s films compel our attention and desire for contemplation, even if any attempts at analysis can only hope, at best, to shed a fraction of light into their mysteries.

This essay will explore Malick’s improbable cinematic career and the interlocking aesthetic qualities and recurring themes that define him as an artist—particularly his rejection of conventional Hollywood narrative, the formal beauty of his imagery, and his use of subjective voice-over narration— as well as his unique positioning as a challenging, idiosyncratic auteur whose films have nevertheless been consistently afforded the resources of major Hollywood studios, which typically shy away from investing significantly in such projects. Central to Malick’s cinema is the fact that their unique mix of qualities accentuates their intertwined spiritual and psychological dimensions: the unconventional narrative structures eschew simple cause-and-effect logic in favor of a metaphysical focus on interconnectedness, especially between humanity and the natural world. In addition, the films’ ethereal lighting makes the physical transcendent and the use of voice-over narration both draws the viewer into an unseen world within his characters and allows Malick to pose challenging philosophical and theological questions generally ignored in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

## An Improbable Career



Malick has remained an inscrutable figure throughout his career, defined primarily by the absence of his voice outside of its embodiment in his films. One of the most revered of the young directors who made their name in the 1970s as part of the so-called New Hollywood (a group that also includes Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg), Malick has remained recalcitrant in his artistic independence, defining his cinema against mainstream Hollywood conventions while creating an almost impenetrable mystique as a reclusive genius via his decades-long absence from interview chairs and red carpet premieres. For those of us outside his close circle of confidants and friends, Malick the artist and his films are virtually one and the same because they are all we have. Interestingly, the inseparability of Malick the artist and his films is belied by the fact that cinema was neither his first love nor his initially intended profession. As he told Beverly Walker in 1975, after discovering that he was not a good teacher, “I decided to do something else. I’d always liked movies in a kind of naive way. They seemed no less improbable a career than anything else.” According to director/producer Rob Cohen, who hired Malick in the mid-1980s to adapt Larry McMurtry’s novel *The Desert Rose*, “He was very tense and fragile, the least likely person to be a director.”

Particularly at a time when we have become fully accustomed to media saturation, the cult of celebrity, twenty-four-hour news, and massive digital networks of instantly accessible information, the improbable and mystifying nature of Malick the artist who refuses to step under the magnifying glass is all the more compelling, imbuing his films with an additional layer of extra-diegetic allure. The numbers are telling: in a filmmaking career that now spans forty years and counting, he has written and directed only seven films—*Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), and *Knight of Cups* (2015)—and during that time he has consented to only a handful of interviews, the two most significant of which were both published in 1975, one in the French journal *Positif* and one in the British film journal *Sight & Sound*. His last “proper” interview was given to French journalist Yvonne Baby in 1979 for an article published in *Le Monde*.

Malick’s general silence on his works was intensified by the two-decade gap between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, during which time An Improbable Career 5 he all but vanished from the public eye. Each passing year increased his aura and drew stronger and stronger comparisons to authors J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon and chess master Bobby Fischer, all geniuses who shunned the spectacle of public celebrity, choosing instead to lead intensely private lives and refusing to play by the rules set by others. Malick has never attended one of the premieres of his films, and even though he was nominated for Oscars for both *The Thin Red Line* (in 1999) and *The Tree of Life* (in 2012), he declined to be present at either ceremony. He has refused to



participate in any of the supplementary materials included in DVD and Blu-ray releases of his films, despite *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The Thin Red Line* being distributed by the prestigious Criterion Collection. Pictures of him are so scarce that, when Italian filmmakers Luciano Barcaroli, Carlo Hintermann, Gerardo Panichi, and Daniele Villa made the documentary *Rosy-Fingered Dawn: A Film on Terrence Malick* (2002), they were not able to secure a single image of him.

Information about Malick's early life is limited, with much of it deriving from the two interviews he gave in 1975, the similarities of which led Lloyd Michaels to opine, "[it is] as if the circumspect director had rehearsed the commentary he wished to be disseminated about his life and first film." Malick was born in either Waco, Texas, or Ottawa, Illinois. He is the son of an oil company executive, although he spent some of his childhood growing up in Austin, Texas, and Oklahoma. An excellent student with a clearly brilliant mind, he attended Harvard from 1961 to 1966, where he studied under the philosopher and film theorist Stanley Cavell (who directed his senior honors thesis, *The Concept of Horizon in Husserl and Heidegger*) and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Malick was later named a Rhodes Scholar and received a fellowship to attend Magdalen College at the University of Oxford. However, during his time there he displayed early signs of his idiosyncratic temperament, and he left without a degree after his senior tutor, the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, rejected his proposal to write a dissertation on the concept of world in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

After leaving Oxford, he bounced around a number of jobs, most of which would inform his later films: working wheat harvests in both the United States and Canada (*Days of Heaven*), working in oil fields and driving a cement mixer in a railyard (*Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Tree of Life*), and eventually working as a freelance journalist who contributed to *Life*, *Newsweek*, and the *New Yorker*. During his four months working at the *New Yorker*, he was sent to Bolivia to cover the trial of Régis Debray, the French intellectual who fought alongside Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara. He followed his stint in journalism with a one-year lectureship in philosophy at MIT, which, along with the 1969 publication of his translation of Martin Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* for Northwestern University Press, effectively ended his academic life.

In the fall of 1969, he enrolled in the two-year Master of Film Arts program at the American Film Institute's newly created conservatory in Los Angeles, which encouraged a "film as art" approach to filmmaking (Paul Schrader and David Lynch were fellow new students). Having never made a film before, Malick considered his experience at AFI "very helpful" and called it "a marvelous place." For his thesis film, he collaborated with actors Harry Dean Stanton and Warren Oates to make *Lanton Mills*, an absurdist seventeen-minute short film about a pair of cowboys who set off to rob a bank and inexplicably stumble into modern-day Los Angeles. Malick admitted at the



time that he didn't know what he was doing and was unsatisfied with the finished product, although he donated a copy of it to the AFI with the stipulation that only AFI scholars could view the film at the institute library in Los Angeles. Theresa Schwartzman, one of the few people who has actually seen the film and written about it at any length, describes it as quite unlike the serene, philosophical cinema typically associated with Malick. Rather, it is an "endearing" comedy, "marked by a goofy, sprawling, messy humor that puts it squarely in the comedy genre, and much of its comedy resides in Malick's own touching performance as a slow-witted cowboy buffoon." While studying at the AFI, Malick also secured numerous screenplay rewrite jobs through agent Michael Medavoy for studio films as varied as *Drive, He Said* (1971), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Pocket Money* (1972), and *Deadhead Miles* (1972), which helped pave the way for his first feature film, *Badlands*.

### ***Badlands* (1973)**

Malick began work on *Badlands* near the end of his second year at the AFI. While working on the screenplay, he took the daring and, at the time, novel approach of bypassing the major studios and independent distributors for funding and self-financed the film by securing the involvement of multiple investors. (He raised half of the film's \$300,000 budget, while executive producer Edward R. Pressman secured the other half.) The resulting film, despite falling squarely into the general category of the romantic-young-killers-on-the-run genre that had exploded in the wake of Arthur Penn's counterculture hit *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), is decidedly unconventional: a broad exercise in demythologizing the heady romance of criminality.

Although loosely based on the two-month, cross-state killing spree of teenagers Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate in 1958, *Badlands* minimizes the inherent sensationalism of its material with a deliberately slow pace, almost to the point of being plodding, and Malick constantly undercuts the potential thrill of on-screen violence by rendering it awkward, vicious, and ugly in its juxtaposition with tranquility. The protagonist, Kit (Martin Sheen), is a handsome drifter with no particular place to go and nothing to do. Described numerous times as being a dead ringer for James Dean, he is a mixture of charming boyishness and coldhearted killer. He begins a courtship with fifteen-year-old Holly (Sissy Spacek), a somewhat gawky, underdeveloped girl with freckles and bright eyes. She shows more curiosity than intelligence, which is evidenced in her banal, almost embarrassingly honest voice-over narration (at one point, she admits she loves Kit because he likes her even though she isn't pretty, and she isn't popular). Holly's narration also carries with it an unsettling charge given that it is spoken in the past tense, yet reflects no real emotional involvement or sense of trauma from the violence with which she was involved.

Kit and Holly run away together after Kit shoots and kills her father (Warren

Oates), who doesn't approve of their relationship. The singularly unromantic nature of the killing confirms the film's approach to bloodshed: When Kit suddenly pulls a pistol on Holly's father, you get the feeling that he's bluffing, and it seems as though he's never handled a gun before. Nevertheless, he shoots him in cold blood, and by the time the film winds its way to its rather unexpected and anticlimactic conclusion, he will have done the same thing to more than a half dozen other people across two states—all with the same deadpan, uncaring sense of necessity.

*Badlands* was met with broad critical success, and it was chosen as the closing-night film for the 1973 New York Film Festival—a significant honor for a first-time filmmaker.

### ***Days of Heaven (1978)***

Malick took four years to complete his second film, *Days of Heaven*, which was financed and distributed by Paramount Pictures. The story takes place just before World War I and focuses on two central characters, Bill (Richard Gere) and Abby (Brooke Adams), who must flee Chicago because Bill has accidentally killed his foreman at a steel mill. Along with Bill's preteen sister, Linda (Linda Manz), they escape by train to the Texas Panhandle. Pretending to be brother and sister, rather than lovers, Bill and Abby join other itinerate workers harvesting wheat on a massive farm owned by a wealthy, but lonely young farmer (Sam Shepard). The Farmer's life is epitomized by his Gothic-style house, which is large and beautiful but completely isolated on the top of a hill, more sad than powerful. The Farmer falls in love with Abby and asks her to stay. Bill, having overheard a conversation suggesting that the Farmer has only a year left to live (his exact illness is left vague), encourages Abby to marry him, knowing that it will provide a short-term safe haven and, when the Farmer eventually dies, long-term financial stability.

Thus Malick establishes a love triangle in which Abby is torn between the two men, each of whom represents a different element of masculine attractiveness. Whereas Bill is free and wild and not entirely in control of his emotions, the Farmer is wealthy and accomplished, but also shy and somewhat sickly. His love for Abby is a kind of puppy love, and the manner in which she and Bill exploit it is unnerving, although strangely understandable. If the romantic triangle in *Days of Heaven* seems somewhat slight, it is because Malick is contrasting human triviality with the grandeur of the world, which has a biblical intensity that reaches a fever pitch in the climax when a swarm of locusts descends on the farm like a plague. The resulting fire that burns the land is like a wrathful cleansing, and it should come as no surprise that the climax of the love triangle occurs on a scorched, smoldering field, thus bringing full circle Malick's poetic vision of human frailty.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its visual elegance, *Days of Heaven* was a



*Figure 1.1* In *Days of Heaven* (1978), Malick contrasts human triviality with the biblical grandeur of the world, which climaxes with a swarm of locusts descending on the farm like a plague (Digital Frame Enlargement).

torturous production, beset with conflicts between Malick and producers Bert and Harold Schneider, as well as Richard Gere, a relatively new actor who was not Malick's first choice for the lead role (he had wanted John Travolta). Malick refused to work by the schedules and routines of typical Hollywood filmmaking—he discarded much of the script he had written and instead improvised during principal photography, regularly altered the shooting schedule, ordered the construction of an elaborate set for the mansion that was barely used, and took almost two years to edit the film. The consequent perception that he was overly idiosyncratic, demanding, and perfectionistic only heightened when he all but disappeared for the next twenty years, leaving behind two extraordinary films and a trail of rumors and hearsay.

### **The Missing Two Decades**

Contrary to popular belief, Malick was not idle during his two decades of self-imposed exile. As Oliver Lyttelton notes, “While the popular myth is that Terrence Malick simply disappeared . . ., as always, the truth is a bit more blurry.” Despite being almost completely off the radar, Malick was quite busy during this time, working on numerous projects that were always veiled in the utmost secrecy and all of which wound up either being made by someone else or being cast aside in a ring of developmental purgatory. Among these was a script for a biographical film about rock 'n' roll pioneer Jerry Lee Lewis, which Malick left in the late 1980s when the producers rejected his



darker take on Lewis's life (the film was eventually made in a very different tone as *Great Balls of Fire!*, written and directed by Jim McBride, in 1989). This was neither the first nor the last time that one of Malick's intended projects wound up being completed by another filmmaker. In the late 1970s, he spent eighteen months working on a film about Joseph Merrick before abandoning it when David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) was announced. More directly, Malick worked for a considerable period of time on a film about Che Guevara before turning the project over to Steven Soderbergh, who completed it as the two-part *Che* (2008).

Malick also worked quite extensively on both *The English Speaker*, which was based on Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud's 1880s Vienna studies of Bertha Pappenheim, an Austrian-Jewish feminist whose treatment for hysteria under the pseudonym Anna O is generally regarded as the beginning of psychoanalysis, and *Q*, a legendary mystery project that grew into a 250-page script featuring a fantastical prologue depicting the origins of the universe that eventually morphed into the creation sequences in *The Tree of Life*. Malick also continued to work as a screenwriter-for-hire, polishing Hollywood scripts and writing several adaptations of novels, including Percy Walker's *The Moviegoer* and Larry McMurtry's *Desert Rose*, neither of which was made into a film. His most public work was an ill-fated foray into theater in 1993, when he adapted the fourteenth-century Buddhist fable "Sansho the Bailiff" with Polish director Andrzej Wajda, a disastrous project that never made it past the workshop stage due to creative conflict between Malick and Wajda and the financial backers pulling out at the last minute.

### **The Thin Red Line (1998)**

Finally, in the mid-1990s, entrepreneurial producers Robert Geisler and John Roberdeau, who had been working with Malick off and on since 1978 and had spearheaded the *Sansho the Bailiff* debacle (primarily as a means of staying in contact with Malick), convinced him to return to the cinema with an adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*, James Jones's semi-autobiographical 1962 novel about the taking of Guadalcanal from the Japanese in 1943, one of the major turning points in World War II. As with *Days of Heaven*, Malick's extensive screenplay, which he had begun working on in 1988, was often cast aside in favor of improvisation and reworked entirely in the editing room. While there are more than a dozen major characters in *The Thin Red Line*, many of them are on-screen so briefly and with such little impact on either the narrative or the other characters that it is hard to remember when they appeared in the film and when they disappeared. They often look alike in their heavy uniforms, and the characters essentially blend together, suggesting that Malick sees them less as individuals than as different faces of the same basic humanity.

The result was a profoundly unconventional war film: a nearly three hour visual

poem organized largely around the juxtaposition of the beauty of nature with the harsh destruction of mankind at war. “Guadalcanal would be a Paradise Lost,” Geisler said, “an Eden, raped by the green poison, as Terry used to call it, of war.” Working with cinematographer John Toll, Malick used the film’s imagery as repeating stanzas, particularly a magnificent low-angle shot looking up into the canopy of trees overhead, with hazy shafts of sunlight breaking through the leaves. Throughout the film, Malick’s camera is constantly drawn to the animals whose lives go on despite the war-induced mania that is taking over and often destroying their habitats. In fact, the film opens with a shot of a crocodile, and in some of the most important sequences, Malick cuts away from the human characters to show a dying bird, bats, lizards, snakes, and other assorted denizens of the jungle, which he often uses obliquely to show the violence of war.



*Figure 1.2* Edenic nature destroyed by war in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is most clearly visualized in the destruction of the hill the American soldiers are trying to take from the Japanese (Digital Frame Enlargements).



The film's theme of Edenic nature destroyed by "the green poison" of war is most clearly visualized in the strategic hill the American soldiers are trying to take from the Japanese. When the Americans first advance on the hill, it is lush and beautiful, covered with a swaying carpet of long grass; by the time they have finally taken it, it is a burned-out wasteland of charred dirt, decaying bodies, and empty mortar shells, thus visually echoing the destructive fire at the end of *Days of Heaven*. The horrifyingly magnificent sequence in which the soldiers finally take the top of the hill is the film's crescendo of emotional and visual power. As Hans Zimmer's haunting musical score gradually floods the soundtrack and many of the diegetic sounds of battle fade out, we are left with stark images of American soldiers decimating the remaining Japanese, many of whom are sick or starved and at the edge of insanity. The result is a gripping, even devastating, portrait of victory that is no victory at all.

### **The New World (2005)**

Given that the gap between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line* was a full two decades, the mere seven years between *The Thin Red Line* and Malick's fourth film, *The New World*, could very well be seen as a quick turnaround. An intriguing, but ponderous historical epic, *The New World* extended Malick's narrative and thematic preoccupations without necessarily deepening them. His affinity for the natural world and his disgust at humankind's destruction continued to be guiding thematic strands, although not nearly to the extent one would imagine given that the film tells the story of the roots of Europe's colonization of North America. In essence, *The New World* is a retelling of the well-worn romanticized legend of the relationship between soldier-of-fortune John Smith (Colin Farrell) and the Powhatan princess Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) beginning with the founding of the Jamestown colony in 1607. The name "Pocahontas" is never once uttered in the film, most likely as a self-conscious indicator of Malick's desire to separate his vision from all those that came before him, particularly Disney's bloodless 1995 animated version.

As with Malick's previous films, *The New World* is a duly impressive work, particularly in its imagery and unexpected rhythms. The film's opening scenes are among its best, as it gives the viewer narrative information in often fragmented chunks that defy expectations, but still keeps the narrative coherent. It also establishes in strong terms Malick's thematic preoccupation with "civilization," and the portrait he paints of the Europeans and their desperate ways, riddled as they are with contradiction, selfishness, and betrayal, is frequently powerful. Visually, Malick adds to the film's impact with unexpected transitions, such as violent moments like Smith angrily kicking over a chair that are suddenly devoid of sound, focusing us that much more intently on the physical action itself. While the film as a whole failed to move Malick's art forward in any significant way, it remains a compelling piece of work and

one in need of further analysis.

### **The Tree of Life (2011)**

By the time *The Tree of Life* was set for theatrical release in late spring 2011, a full three years after production had begun in Smithville, a small town outside of Austin, Texas, it was one of the most highly anticipated films of the year. By this point, any Terrence Malick film was a major event given the length of time between his projects and his standing as a rare breed of filmmaker: a resolutely independent and iconoclastic philosopher-auteur who could still command studio backing and media attention. Anticipation was also heightened by the extreme secrecy surrounding the film's production, with rumors about scenes set in outer space and the presence of dinosaurs amid a small-town, coming-of-age drama fueling fascination and expectations. When the film debuted at invitation-only screenings at the Grand Théâtre Lumière at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2011, a year after it was initially supposed to premiere, it was both booed and applauded by audiences before taking home the Palme d'Or—the festival's top prize and one of the most coveted of international film accolades. When it was theatrically released in the United States a few weeks later, it was met with praise and puzzlement, as critics and viewers either rejected the film as needlessly complex and maddeningly ambiguous or scrambled with great vigor to make sense of its ambitious metaphysical implications. *Time* film critic Richard Corliss neatly summarized the divergent responses to the film: "Those viewers who don't go, 'Wow!' may say, 'Huh?' or 'Phooey!'"

The majority of the story in *The Tree of Life* takes place in Waco, Texas, which is where Malick spent much of his childhood in the 1950s. His onscreen adolescent surrogate is Jack (Hunter McCracken), the oldest of three brothers. Jack and his family live in a picturesque neighborhood that is defined by wide streets, huge trees, and low-lying ranch houses that always seem to be open, even when the doors are closed. Jack's parents, who are known only as Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien (Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain), are fundamental opposites: Whereas he is a strong-willed disciplinarian who tries to instill in his children a fierce sense of purpose and drive in order to compensate for his corporate failures, she is tenderhearted and forgiving, instilling in her sons simple lessons about love, kindness, and forgiveness. His stern intensity and her angelic acceptance are each projections of their love, and Malick presents them without explicit judgment. While each parenting approach has its merits, each also has a tendency to stray into excess, with the father's discipline sometimes boiling over into simple violence, while the mother's gentleness threatens to lapse into a complete lack of control.

While the majority of *The Tree of Life* takes place in the '50s, there are also scenes set in the present day, where the adult Jack (Sean Penn) works in a large city as



an architect, a career that reflects his father's work as an engineer (he is both a product of and a rebellion against his father's discipline). Interwoven throughout the film are primal, hallucinatory scenes that take place at the forming of the universe and possibly its ultimate destruction— ideas that originated in Malick's lengthy, never-produced screenplay for *Q*. One sequence late in the film may be taking place in the afterlife or only inside Jack's dreams, and the manner in which Malick connects it with the seemingly trivial details of everyday life and the overwhelming enormity of the universe forms the film's spiritual core.

### **To the Wonder (2012)**

In recent years, Malick's pace of production has increased dramatically, with the gap between each of his subsequent films getting progressively shorter. While two decades passed between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, it was only seven years between that film and *The New World*. Six years passed before the release of *The Tree of Life*, which was followed only a year later by *To the Wonder*. *To the Wonder* was given a small, significantly less heralded simultaneous theatrical and video-on-demand release, which marked it as a "small picture," at least by Malick's standards, which is only appropriate because, at its best, the film plays like a companion piece to its immediate predecessor. Both are semi-autobiographical stories that take place in locations where Malick spent his childhood and young adulthood (Waco, Texas, and Central Oklahoma, respectively). Although at times the similarities make *To the Wonder* feel like *The Tree of Life*'s little brother— comparable in spirit, but smaller in effect; visually beautiful, but narratively less ambitious; and sprawling, but not always in a way that conveys the magnitude of existence. It is a decidedly mixed film, an experiment in fragmented, impressionistic storytelling that keeps its characters just a bit too far out of reach, their symbolic qualities trumping their flesh-and-blood passions. Malick at his best merges the intensely intellectual with the intensely emotional, and here the balance feels slightly off.

Like *Days of Heaven* and *The New World*, *To the Wonder* centers on a love triangle, albeit not in the traditional vein of Hollywood romance. The film follows the relationship of Neil (Ben Affleck), an environmental inspector who lives in Oklahoma, and Marina (Olga Kurylenko), a single mother from Paris who moves to the United States along with her ten-year-old daughter Tatiana (Tatiana Chiline) in order to be with him. However, as in those previous films, human love is shown to be a messy, conflicted, sometimes even violent endeavor. Neil and Marina go through their ups and downs, are tempted by others (he by an old flame played by Rachel McAdams and she by a carpenter played by Charles Baker), are driven apart, and are then drawn back together again. Malick frames their affair within a larger story involving a priest (Javier Bardem) who is striving to do God's work, especially among the disaffected and poor, but at times questions his own faith. His explicitly religious crisis reflects the



existential alienation of Neil and Marina, thus tying them all together in the quest for true meaning and fulfillment.

Malick conveys the rapturous nature of Neil and Marina's initial love affair almost entirely through the actors' eyes and body language, while whispered voice-over narration supplements the physical and visual with the philosophical and religious. The characters' tremulous ruminations feel as if they are emanating from their souls, rather than their minds, which gives the film a sense of spiritual depth that turns the unfolding domestic drama into a portrait of humankind's separation from God. Malick further underscores this impression in scenes involving the destruction of the local environment via pollution and mining; one of the most memorable images follows Neil as he stumbles through what looks like a post-apocalyptic landscape near his housing development. It is no small detail that Neil's job is to investigate the source of pollution, as the film continually draws us back to its underlying theme that the source of conflict in the world is our increasing separation from the divine.

Much of the film unfolds in a cookie-cutter suburban neighborhood that has been carved out of the Oklahoma grasslands, and one of the film's recurring visual motifs is the sharp divide between the well-manicured yards and the wild, untamed grassland just beyond the fence; they're like two alien worlds butting up against each other. The sheer banality of the houses and streets underscores the dwindling connection between Neil and Marina as they drift apart, while more romanticized locations such as the medieval Mont Saint-Michel monastery in Normandy or the Midwest's endless fields of wild grass that are still home to the continent's dwindling buffalo population play as backdrop to intensity of feeling, whether it be love or lust. The story unfolds in fragments and elliptical returns to previous moments, and viewers are left to piece much of it together for themselves, which is not surprising given that, with each of his films, Malick has moved steadily toward more and more unconventional means of cinematic storytelling.

### **Knight of Cups (2016)**

It now appears that Malick has fully inverted the pace of production that defined his career and helped intensify his mythical artistic persona between the early 1970s and the early 2000s, shifting from long gaps between feature projects to working on multiple projects simultaneously (albeit with notoriously long post-production periods that leaves gaps of four or five years between principal photography and theatrical release). During the two years when *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* were playing film festivals and theaters, Malick was already working on another slate of feature projects, only one of which, *Knight of Cups*, has been released at the time of this writing. As early as November 2011, just six months after *The Tree of Life* won the Palme d'Or, Daily Variety reported that his next projects—*Knight of Cups* and another film, originally



titled *Lawless*, but now known only as *Untitled Austin Film*—were to be shot and edited simultaneously with a significant overlap in cast members (including Christian Bale, who previously starred in *The New World*, and Cate Blanchett). At the same time, Malick was reportedly also still crafting a documentary titled *Voyage of Time* that expands the “origin of life” sequences interspersed throughout *The Tree of Life* into a feature-length documentary intended for distribution in the IMAX format.

*Knight of Cups* debuted at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2015, where it received mixed reviews. Writing in *Film Criticism*, Gerd Gemünden (2014/2015) called it a “[great] disappointment,” noting that “Devoted Malick fans may appreciate this as another branch in the director’s tree of life, but the majority of filmgoers will be bored to death or simply annoyed.” Olaf Möller, on the other hand, wrote in *Film Comment* that it was the best film of the festival, describing it as “tauter, more compact, more finely trimmed, more controlled and coherent than the director’s other recent work.” As with *To the Wonder*, there is a natural tendency to view *Knight of Cups* through the prism of *The Tree of Life*, as it expands on many of the same aesthetic, narrative, and visual devices, albeit within a much more contained narrative. While many of the same themes persist in *Knight of Cups*—alienation, fractured families, the contrast between natural beauty and the corruptions of human society, a search for spiritual fulfillment and love—the film’s setting in modern Hollywood marks it as a radical departure from Malick’s other films, all of which, with the exception of *To the Wonder* and parts of *The Tree of Life*, take place in the past and usually within rural or small-town settings. Large urban environments had appeared only in present-day sequences in *The Tree of Life* via the enormous, glass-and-steel skyscrapers of downtown Houston, Texas.

*Knight of Cups* follows an alienated Hollywood screenwriter named Rick (Bale) who has been “living the life of someone [he doesn’t] know” as he wanders through the modern-day Babylon of Los Angeles and Las Vegas. His past and present swirl together as he searches for some kind of spiritual and interpersonal fulfillment. The majority of the scenes take place on Hollywood backlots, in and around enormous mansions in Beverly Hills, in neo-lit nightclubs, in expensive hotel rooms, and inside Rick’s minimalist modern apartment. From time to time, the emphasis on the urban is broken with evocative traveling shots of desert and mountain landscapes that feel even more powerful for their isolation. The film begins with the image of Rick walking alone in a desert landscape—a visual literalization of his character’s spiritual wandering in the wilderness that was similarly used in *The Tree of Life*—and it ends with a first-person perspective of a car barreling down a highway, suggesting that there is hope on the road ahead.

Breaking from the Judeo-Christian themes and imagery that dominate his earlier films, in *Knight of Cups*, Malick turns to a different form of spirituality via the



tarot, which is more often than not associated with mysticism, the occult, and paganism. However, it is not particularly surprising that Malick would turn to tarot imagery and terminology; according to Eden Gray, “The true Tarot is symbolism: it speaks a language that arises from the collective mind of Man,” which could almost double as a description for the philosophical goal of Malick’s cinema. The film’s title, *Knight of Cups*, refers to one of the fifty-six suit cards in the Minor Arcana. The card depicts a stately, armored knight wearing a winged helmet (a symbol for imagination) and holding a cup in his outstretched hand while riding a horse toward a stream. The knight’s symbolic meaning is an apt describer for the character of Rick:

a wandering lover, messenger of hidden or repressed desires and violent passions. He is intensely secretive and mysterious . . . Under a calm and charming demeanor, great ambition and intensity smolder. He is endowed with artistic talent. Though his company does not promise rest or ease, it can signal a renewal, particularly in the domain of love. He also augurs secrets given in confidence or new propositions revealed . . . The Knight of Cups can signal an innovation or a romantic encounter or journey.

The Major Arcana of the tarot supplies the seemingly enigmatic titles of seven of the film’s eight chapters—“The Moon,” “The Hanged Man,” “The Hermit,” “Judgment,” “The Tower,” “The High Priestess,” and “Death”—with each referring to a character in the film or a development in Rick’s journey toward self-understanding. The eighth chapter, “Freedom,” is the only title not derived from the tarot, thus reinforcing the sense that Rick has been successful in his inward journey.

Even more so than *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups* dispenses almost entirely with dialogue, relying instead on pure imagery and voice-over narration to tie the fragmented threads of the story together and offer some degree of narrative coherence as Rick attempts to move from darkness to light. Different aspects of Rick’s life, both personal and professional, merge and collapse, particularly his strained relationships with his overbearing father (Brian Dennehy), his rebellious brother (Wes Bentley), and his fleeting connections with a half-a-dozen women, which include his ex-wife (Cate Blanchett) and a married woman with whom he had an affair (Natalie Portman). In this sense, the film feels like a direct extension of and elaboration on *To the Wonder*, as it explores Rick’s spiritual crisis via his failed relationships with various women who represent different facets of the human experience.

### **Malick’s Artistic Vision**

Having discussed each of Malick’s films individually, the remainder of this chapter will explore in detail the aesthetics of his sustained artistic vision—specifically his rejection of conventional Hollywood narrative, the formal beauty of his imagery, and

the use of subjective voice-over narration.

### ***Unconventional Narrative***

With each of his films, Malick has drawn further and further away from the conventional traits of classical Hollywood narrative, particularly a chronologically linear, cause-and-effect organization of narrative events. While he was known for going “off script” in his early films, by *Knight of Cups* he had abandoned the traditional screenplay entirely, relying instead on his actors to improvise based on broad character sketches and virtually no knowledge of how the story would play out, with the result being hours and hours of footage that can then be shaped in the editing room. The process is well summarized by Antonio Banderas discussing his experience working on *Knight of Cups*:

I remember when I got to the set in the morning, [Malick] called me and said, “Antonio, I’m sorry I didn’t send you the script. You know why I didn’t send you the script?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, there is no script. We are just working as we go. I am creating the movie as I go. I have a central character and I have certain ideas, and I put him in different situations of life . . . So, I’m shooting a lot of things, and I don’t know what I’m gonna edit because I have a movie where, if I put together the whole entire thing, it might be as long as a week. But, I invite you to play. Feel free . . .”

David Bordwell memorably called classical Hollywood cinema “excessively obvious,” meaning that all the formal traits that characterize such films contribute toward a full and thorough understanding of the narrative. The formal elements of Hollywood cinema—editing, camerawork, lighting, sound effects, musical scores, and so on—are also, in most conventional films, “invisible,” meaning that they play their various roles within the film without drawing undue attention to themselves. Malick’s films, beginning with *Badlands* and culminating with *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups*, have increasingly challenged both the “excessive obviousness” of cinematic narrative and the “invisibility” of its formal traits, albeit within the parameters of a consistent artistic vision that is comprehensible to those who have seen his films and are familiar with his style.

While *Badlands* is told in a fairly conventional narrative manner, moving chronologically within a clear cause-and-effect logic, it nevertheless displays Malick’s tendency to subvert typical audience expectations. While Hollywood cinema relies heavily on a psychologically defined protagonist, one whose actions “make sense” to the viewer even if he or she disagrees with them ethically or morally, in *Badlands*, Malick refuses to clarify Kit and his violence. Early in the film, Kit gives excuses as to why he kills people, such as when he kills three bounty hunters who have tracked him





and Holly in the woods where they are hiding. He explains that if they had been police officers, he would have felt bad about shooting them in the back, but since they were only in it for the money, they didn't matter. After a while, though, he stops making excuses because, for Kit, killing is neither joy nor pain. Instead, he kills for the sheer convenience of the act, thinking of neither the suffering of his victim nor the repercussions that might eventually come down on him. He is a moral void, and his apathy, like Holly's, is ultimately inscrutable. Malick never attempts to explain him or his actions with any kind of psychological background. He simply *is*.

With *Days of Heaven*, Malick moves into an even more abstract form of narrative that minimizes individual characters and their plights in favor of an approach that draws attention to broad philosophical questions and concerns. Remnants of conventional narrative remain in the central love triangle and Bill's scheme to have Abby marry the Farmer for his money, but they are constantly overshadowed by the film's visual force. As Lloyd Michaels puts it, "[Malick's] sense of narrative is lyrical rather than linear," an approach that becomes even more pronounced with *The Thin Red Line*, in which individual characters are difficult to differentiate and only the middle section of the film has anything to do with the strategies of warfare. Similarly, *The New World* achieves a sustained sense of narrative abstraction by "subordinating dramatic structure and dialogue to stunning visual compositions . . . and complicating moral or ideological judgments about the characters."

*The Tree of Life* operates at an even more profound level of narrative abstraction, discarding virtually every convention of Hollywood storytelling in favor of an approach that is literalized in a recurring image that both opens and closes the film: a beautiful, but ambiguous light that briefly grows and illuminates the middle of an otherwise black screen, gently undulating with different colors before disappearing. What this light is meant to represent—a human soul, the presence of God, the first moment of creation, perhaps?—is left purposefully vague and open to interpretation even though it is clearly a constituent part of the film's overall conception. It may be ambiguous, but it is not random.

*The Tree of Life* also marks a shift for Malick into fully nonlinear storytelling, which he continued in *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*. For all of their narrative complexities, his first four features followed a generally linear progression, with only flashbacks and subjective character memories interrupting the overall forward momentum. *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups*, on the other hand, have virtually no temporal coherence; they move back and forth freely in time, and because each temporal shift is visually unmarked, the viewer must be constantly engaged in order to put the pieces together (although even the most discerning cinephile will require multiple viewings to successfully comprehend what is happening in every scene and how it relates to other scenes).



For example, within the first four minutes of *The Tree of Life*, the film skips across three decades, with no clear means of demarking the time shifts except for physical evidence within the frame such as changes in architecture and interior décor and aging in the characters' faces. The film begins with Mrs. O'Brien as a young girl growing up on a farm and enjoying the pastoral beauties of the land and the affection of her father, ostensibly in the late 1930s or early '40s. The film then jumps ahead a decade or so to her as a young mother in Waco in the mid-1950s, where the majority of the film will take place. We see her swinging in the front yard, serving dinner to her family, and running in the street with her children, which seems to confirm that the familial bliss of her childhood has continued into her adult life, a notion the rest of the film will both support and contradict. The film then leaps another decade or so to the late 1960s, where she and her husband learn of the death of their youngest son, a character who has not yet been properly introduced except in a few fleeting shots. The viewer never hears of the death directly: Mrs. O'Brien reads the news in a telegram that remains unseen by anyone but her, and Mr. O'Brien receives a phone call (ostensibly from her) that is drowned out by a nearby airplane engine. Thus the viewer is left to surmise what has happened from the characters' anguished reactions and the foreboding tolling of a bell on the soundtrack until it is confirmed by the offscreen words of a pastor conducting the funeral: "He's with God now." The manner in which Malick obliquely conveys this information is characteristic of the film as a whole, as is its function within the narrative. In a conventional film, the death of a major character in the first few minutes would be the launching point for the story, but here it serves no direct narrative purpose, although it does function philosophically (by reminding the viewer of the transient nature of human existence and the omnipresence of death amid life) and emotionally (knowing that the brother will die at a young age affects how we see him as a gentle, trusting child, especially when Jack or his father treat him cruelly).

Similarly, the juxtaposition of sequences in *The Tree of Life* has a profound effect on its meaning, even if there is no immediate narrative logic. Malick's placement of the much-discussed creation sequence, for example, seems at first to be arbitrary. Unlike Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), whose bold "Dawn of Man" sequence takes place quite logically at the beginning of the film, thus establishing a chronological as well as symbolic connection between the activities of early human ancestors and the characters of the near-distant future, *The Tree of Life* depicts the creation of the universe and the emergence of life on Earth roughly half an hour into the 138-minute film. However, its placement within the narrative flow makes philosophical sense in that it follows the initial establishment of the O'Brien family, the film's microcosm of human existence. More importantly, though, is that it is immediately followed by a few brief shots of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's initial courtship and her being pregnant with and giving birth to Jack. Thus the creation of the universe is bookended



by depictions of family and the creation of human life, conflating the film's micro- and macrocosmic interests. It is a beautiful and subtle way of both relating individual human lives to the enormity of the cosmos and putting them in relief. Thus, while *The Tree of Life* and subsequently *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups* expand on Malick's previous narrative experimentation by dispensing with conventional storytelling logic, they still proceed within the bounds of their own system, which tend to follow an emotional and philosophical, rather than temporal, pathway.

### ***Beautiful Imagery***

While the narrative and characters in Malick's films are often vague, purposefully simplistic, or undefined, their images are indelibly striking and are invariably what people best remember about them. Even if we forget the details of the story or the names of the characters and walk out of the theater unsure of what it all "meant," we carry away with us almost tactile memories of visual moments in each of his films—Kit and Holly dancing in the headlights of their car in *Badlands*, half-a-dozen men silhouetted against a golden sky as thousands of locusts rise from the field in *Days of Heaven*, soldiers moving slowly through the shoulder-high grass in *The Thin Red Line*, a slow-motion underwater shot of a dog chasing after a ball in *Knight of Cups*. The consistency of Malick's visual approach, despite working with different cinematographers, binds his films together and gives them a sense of unity. His use of certain images across films reinforces this unity: shafts of light penetrating a ceiling of tree limbs, long grasses waving in the breeze or underwater, and characters diminished in the enormity of nature around them, often captured with roving camera moves that seem to be both prescient and completely in the moment.

*Badlands* established Malick's use of painterly images of nature to comment (often harshly) on humanity and its flaws. In this case, the severe bleakness of the titular South Dakota landscape, powerfully photographed by cinematographers Brian Pobyn, Tak Fujimoto, and Steven Lerner, plays as a constant reminder of Kit and Holly's alienation and the emotional void they inhabit. You get the feeling that if you could look into Kit's heart, an endless stretch of badlands would greet you. *Days of Heaven* intensified Malick's focus on the natural environment, which inherently minimizes the human subjects within it, often reducing them, as Lloyd Michaels suggests, to "props in the mis-en-scene." The majority of that film's tragedy is played out against a backdrop of serene beauty—a seemingly endless rolling landscape beneath a dramatic sky—beautifully captured by cinematographers Néstor Almendros and Haskell Wexler. The intense beauty of the landscapes, which Malick often uses as "pillow shots" between scenes in the same manner as Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, has a cumulative power that emphasizes the ultimately miniscule nature of humankind in the





*Figure 1.3* The consistency of Malick's visual approach is reinforced by his use of certain images across films: shafts of light penetrating a ceiling of tree limbs (*The Thin Red Line*, 1998), long grasses waving in the breeze (*The New World*, 2005), characters diminished in the enormity of nature around them (*To the Wonder*, 2012) (Digital Frame Enlargements).



natural world, which is a theme to which Malick returns again and again. He shot the majority of *Days of Heaven* with natural light at the “magic hour,” that brief period of time when the sun has begun to set and the light takes on an ethereal quality found at no other time. Although it is a period film with close attention paid to the details of life and labor in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, the lighting and camera-work make it feel as if it takes place inside a dream, an aesthetic that would come to define his subsequent films.

The imagery and use of natural lighting in *The Tree of Life* is similarly oneiric, turning the potentially banal world of small-town America during the Eisenhower era into a fluid dreamscape of varied emotional textures. As Malick’s primary focus in the film is on childhood (which is why we never hear the parents’ first names), the film’s visual approach is permeated with a constant sense of wonderment, aligning the film visually with its narrative preoccupation with memory, spiritual, and psychological growth as well as the coexistence of desire and loss. The film’s most transcendent moments are the ones in which Malick and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki (who has shot all of Malick’s films since *The Tree of Life*) imbue the antics of childhood with a spiritual dimension, the best being the neighborhood kids running behind a truck and playing in the clouds of DDT smoke being spread to control mosquitoes. That the film successfully turns toxic exposure into a poetic evocation of childhood abandon is testament to its emotional and visual power.

Because, as noted earlier, *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups* break free of a strictly chronological, cause-and-effect narrative structure, their images are freed to play multiple roles simultaneously. On a purely formal level, many of the images in these films are beautiful in their own right, affirming Ron Mottram’s contention that Malick’s contribution to modern art is that “he restores the beauty and power of the image as a carrier of meaning.” The fact that many of the images are either brief shots inserted between longer sequences or exist within lengthy montages composed of dozens of shots, only enhances their impact. They remind the viewer that beauty—like life and love—is fleeting in the grand scheme of the cosmos, a point literalized in *The Tree of Life* in a sermon about the Book of Job:

We run before the wind. We think that it will carry us forever. It will not. We vanish as a cloud, we wither as the autumn grass, and like a tree are rooted up. Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless? Nothing which does not pass away?

Malick’s imagery also endeavors to reorient the viewer, to encourage us to view the familiar elements of the world from a different perspective. Hence the memorable upside-down shot of two children’s elongated shadows cast on the pavement in the late afternoon sun, the mother’s reflection in a window that at first appears to locate her inside rather than outside the house, and a recurring shot of crashing waves seen



from the ocean floor, which turns the resultant underwater plumes into a visual echo of the cloud-like nebulae in the film's creation sequence.

*The Tree of Life* is replete with such visual echoes, and the film's editing builds a sustained interplay between opposites—loud to silent, physical to spiritual, macro to micro. Malick depicts with the same visual intensity and elegance both the incomprehensible vastness of outer space in the cosmos and the similarly incomprehensible vastness of inner space inside a cell. Both create an indelible sense of eternity, of the enormous grandeur of the world in both its size and its complexity. Thus his imbuing of the otherwise mundane activities of life with a rigorous formal beauty ties them explicitly to the very act of creation, suggesting that everything in the universe is a crucial part of an eternal whole. However small the lives of his characters may be, they ultimately matter simply because they exist, an existential beauty literalized by Malick's dazzling imagery.

### ***Subjective Voice-Over Narration***

Each of Malick's films relies heavily on subjective voice-over narration, a cinematic technique that is often considered a narrative crutch. It is a rather crude explanatory device required when a filmmaker is unable to convey necessary narrative information via action and dialogue. However, like the other formal traits evidenced in his films, voice-over takes on new and unexpected dimensions under Malick's direction, transcending expectations in ways both profound and troubling. His use of voice-over falls into two distinct categories, the first of which we see in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* and the second of which we find in *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups*. In his first two films, Malick uses voice-over narration in a relatively straightforward manner: a single diegetic character (in both cases a young girl) comments on the story in a way that suggests temporal distance from the events depicted, even though she speaks in the same voice as her on-screen character (in other words, her voice doesn't reflect someone of a different age). As noted earlier, *Badlands* is narrated by Holly in a way that is almost embarrassingly honest and banal, but at the same time unsettlingly distant, as if the events she endured with Kit had no emotional impact on her. As Lloyd Michaels notes, her laconic expository narration, which consists almost entirely of platitudes and clichés, serves to confound meaning rather than explicate it. The voice-over narration in *Days of Heaven* is superficially similar in that Linda, a young, naive girl who is involved in the story, but mostly from the sidelines, speaks it. However, Linda's drawling narration reflects more insight and thoughtfulness, even if she doesn't entirely understand what has happened. Her voice-over aligns the viewer's perspective of the story with hers, and it gives the sense of fading memories and dark corners that are never fully understood. This helps explain why the film is told in a fragmented form, consisting primarily of images, rather



than words. While exact words are always hard to remember, exact images are not. *The Thin Red Line* marks a major shift in Malick's use of voice-over narration. Not only is the narration now split among multiple characters (some of whom are difficult, if not impossible, to identify), it ceases to be expository in nature. Narration instead consists of "inner monologues" with a more abstract and philosophical tone that often conflates the characters on-screen with an outside intelligence, ostensibly Malick's own. Thus these monologues have little to do with character or story and everything to do with larger, esoteric themes of goodness, evil, and the ravages of human violence on the natural world. *The New World* also features inner monologues from multiple characters; however, unlike in *The Thin Red Line*, where the multiple voice-overs are often disassociated from the characters who are meant to be speaking them (when that connection can be made), the inner voices in *The New World* clearly belong to Smith, Pocahontas, and her eventual husband, John Rolfe (Christian Bale), and emanate directly from their characters and their emotions. In some sense, this marks an artistic step backward for Malick, as the voice-over monologues are largely redundant in function, telling the viewer in overly literate dialogue what is plainly clear in the film's imagery and in the actors' performances.

In *The Tree of Life*, however, the use of inner monologues is fully realized in terms of both providing deeper insight into the characters and addressing larger spiritual, theological and philosophical concerns. Like the film's images, the inner monologues play a wide variety of different roles—commentary, juxtaposition, thematic introduction both literal and figurative, and the expression of thoughts and emotions—although they are all spoken in hushed whispers both confessional and intimate. The inner monologues are often abstract and vague, although they are reflective of each character's temperament: Mr. O'Brien—stern, authoritarian, driven—tends to speak in lectures; Mrs. O'Brien—kind, understanding, emotionally driven—tends to speak in prayers and pleas; while Jack—forever torn between his parents—speaks in cries and challenges. In one inner monologue, Jack notes his father's hypocrisy in punishing him for putting his elbows on the dinner table when he does the very same thing. In doing so, Malick is able to convey information about the father's character while also expressing a son's disillusionment with authority, a recurring theme that largely defines their tumultuous relationship.

However, what truly separates the inner monologues in *The Tree of Life*, and to a lesser extent in *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*, from Malick's previous films is their intensely spiritual character. In *The Thin Red Line*, there were numerous voice-overs that suggested characters were speaking directly to God, as well as some in which it seemed as though nature itself was speaking. In *The Tree of Life*, Malick substantially builds on the spiritual dimensions of the inner monologues, such that many of them function predominantly as prayers, as when Mrs. O'Brien, following her son's death, asks, "Did you



know? Who are we to you? Answer me. We cry to you. My soul. My son. Hear us. Light of my life. I search for you. My hope. My child.” In this brief bit of internal dialogue, she addresses and questions God and then her son, with her final words seeming to conflate the two. Mrs. O’Brien’s words are particularly compelling because we rarely hear her speak in the film, thus suggesting that she leads a largely internal life that is riddled with questions and doubt and wonderment, although Malick uses Jack’s inner monologue to confirm her intensely spiritual nature when he addresses God: “You spoke to me through her. You spoke to me from the sky. The trees. Before I knew I loved you I believed in you. When did you first touch my heart?” As Mrs. O’Brien’s words draw together her creator and the son she created, Jack’s words reflect the interconnectedness between his mother and Mother Nature, with both being a medium through which God speaks to him.

Malick also uses Jack’s direct address to God in ways that mirror his relationship with his father, particularly in the shots following the drowning of a young boy at the local swimming hole, an event that carries no logical narrative weight, yet is crucial from a spiritual perspective in the way it reminds us of mortality and the constant presence of death amid life. In his inner monologue, Jack says, “You let a boy die. You’ll let anything happen. Where were you? Why should I be good if you aren’t?” which cannily reflects his anger at his father’s hypocrisy regarding elbows on the dinner table, thus providing another instance of the film’s subtle, yet profound merging of the micro and the macro. This daring and unconventional use of voice-over narration is almost entirely unique in American cinema, yet it is so perfectly situated within Malick’s overall aesthetic that it is difficult to imagine him making a film without it.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of his improbable cinematic career, which has now stretched into its fourth decade, Terrence Malick has forged an impressive and focused body of work that has built on a series of interlocking aesthetic qualities and recurring themes, namely a rejection of conventional Hollywood narrative combined with the use of visual beauty and subjective voice-over narration. In all of his films, Malick’s unique mix of cinematic qualities and themes accentuates the intertwined spiritual and psychological dimensions of his films. The very familiarity of these qualities is essential to understanding his work and the exceptional manner in which he merges the emotional and the aesthetic, the physical and the spiritual.