

Blasphemy Cries over Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer"

Christianity, to put it bluntly, is the religion that made blasphemy popular.¹

If the state is so closely identified with the religion it has established and the head of the state is also the head of the church, then to subvert the doctrine of the established church is to undermine the authority of the state itself.²

Introduction

Cries of blasphemy directed at Pussy Riot still echo, asserting that a delicate line somewhere between the sacred and the profane has been crossed in ways causing offense to the Russian Orthodox Church and Christian Orthodox believers. These accusations of blasphemy and concern for people's religious convictions have been countered by those who defend freedom of speech and the important role played by activist art in legally criticizing state and church politics.

The mixing of profane and sacred domains in the images and lyrics in the video known as the "Punk Prayer: Holy Mother of God, put Putin away"³ is essential to its political message. It hardly makes much sense to expose the direct confrontation between state authorities and the "rioting" bodies of citizens if not as a deliberate provocation; indeed I suggest that some notion of blasphemy has been put into play as a means to

- 1 S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 55.
- 2 Ivan Hare, "Blasphemy and Incitement to Religious Hatred: Free Speech Dogma and Doctrine," in *Extreme Speech and Democracy*, ed. Ivan Hare and James Weinstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 291.
- 3 See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALS92big4TY> («Pussy Riot-Punk Prayer.mp4», *YouTube*; accessed 10 December, 2013); or at <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>, and http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/#entry-pussy_riot-12442, accessed 9 February, 2014. The song is known in a variety of translations and versions, for example "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out" (Polly McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically: Performance and Authenticity in New Media," *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 9 (2013), 103), and "Our Lady, Chase Putin Out" (Lindsay Zoladz, "Take Me Seriously: Why Pussy Riot Matter," *Pitchfork*, August 16, 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8920-pussy-riot/>) or referred to as an "anti-Putin prayer" (Bernard Marcadé, "Cloaca, Crashes and Pussy Riot," *Art-Press* 395 (2012), 85). I will use the short "Punk Prayer" (Russ., *pank moleben*) throughout this article.

air the protest, to “cause a scandal and maintain its effects,” in media space.⁴ The video, filmed in two of Moscow’s most prestigious cathedrals, is framed as an invocation to the Mother of God to become a feminist, using religious gestures mixed with “anti-authoritarian” punk postures, chanting mixed with screaming voices and distorted guitars, and lyrics packed with curses and oaths aimed at both patriarch and president. The result is a critique of the “cozy ties between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church.”⁵ As Jeremy Patrick, in his study of blasphemy, has suggested, the “shocking nature of blasphemy is exactly what makes it useful in creative endeavours.”⁶ The strategic deployment of some notion of blasphemy as a shock effect in “Punk Prayer” must therefore not be left out of the discussion. Pussy Riot claims to have no interest in the Russian Orthodox Church whatsoever,⁷ yet this seems to contradict the message that their Punk Prayer video promotes. Clearly, Pussy Riot want their video audiences to take notice and begin to ask urgent questions about the role of Orthodoxy in Russian society and politics, especially the Church’s support of Putin prior to the 2012 presidential election.

Since the early 1990s’ “freedom of Faith”-statute in the *perestroika*-spirit, Russia has seen a general religious resurgence in Orthodox Christianity as well as in non-traditional spiritual searching,⁸ giving further evidence to the spread of “un-secularization,”⁹ or “de-secularization,”¹⁰ as a dominant social phenomenon throughout the world in the late twentieth century.¹¹ This concept does not refer to an apoliti-

4 Maria Chehonadskih, “What Is Pussy Riot’s ‘Idea’?,” *Radical Philosophy* 176 (2012), 4.

5 Cathy Young, “Putin Goes to Church,” *Reason* 44/8 (2013).

6 Jeremy Patrick, “The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy,” *Florida Journal of International Law* 23 (2011), 211.

7 Short interview with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova after the symposium: “Pussy Riot Meets Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti,” at the University of Oslo, 12 May, 2014.

8 Davis mentions religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Church of Scientology, etc.; see Derek H. Davis, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Future of Russia,” *Journal of Church and State* 44/4 (2002), 660; see also James W. Warhola, “Religion and Politics Under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation Within “Managed Pluralism”,” *Journal of Church and State* 49/1 (2007), for a discussion of religious pluralism in Russia.

9 George Weigel, “Religion and Peace: An Argument Complexified,” *The Washington Quarterly* 14/2 (1991), 27; see also Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 3 (1993), who in his famous theory of the clashes of civilizations notes the growing role of religion in late-modern political conflicts.

10 Christopher Marsh, *Religion and State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York: Continuum 2011), 16; see also Zoe Knox, “Church, State, and Belief in Post-Soviet Russia,” *The Russian Review* 71 (2012), 123.

11 One of the most dominating structural modernization paradigms, that of coupling the modern society with secularization, preconditions at least theoretically the notions of un-secularization and de-secularization. Though several scholars have argued for “multiple modernities” that include religious commitment and religious belief; see for example Elisabeth Prodromou, “Negotiating Pluralism and Specifying Modernity in Greece: Reading Church-State Relations in the Christodoulos Period,” *Social Compass* 51/4 (2004); Victor Roudometof, “Glocalization, Space, and Modernity,” *The European Legacy* 8/1 (2003); Shmuel Eisenstadt, “The Reconstruction of Religious Arenas in the Framework of “Multiple Modernities”,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29/3 (2000); and James D. Faubion, *Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer in Historical Constructivism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Gordon Lynch calls for a clear distinction between a secularized and a “de-sacralized age” with reference to the persistence of the sacred in modern life; see Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

cal re-spiritualization of society, but rather to an increased interaction of politics and religion – and, of specific interest here, “the re-emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church [...] on the political stage”¹² as a strong actor in the molding of Russian culture and politics aligned with the presidential administration, if not an outright turning the Orthodox Church into a de facto official religion.¹³ Regardless of what else might be said about the Pussy Riot case, it has made “it clear that religion and politics are inextricably intertwined in Russia today.”¹⁴

Precisely because of the transgressive character of the images, sounds and utterances, those who find the video offensive have a hard time seeing how it does anything but display disrespect toward faith, believers, and sacred symbols of the Russian Orthodox Church. The sacred-profane partition, which, along with the revitalization of Christian Orthodoxy is gaining ground as a normative construct in Russia, is challenged by the “Punk Prayer” video in practically every aspect of performance: for the sonic aspect, Orthodox chanting is contrasted with the noisy sound of punk pop; for the lyrical aspect, an original prayer is modified and blended with feminist agendas, political utterances and swearing; for the visual aspect, bodily gestures commonly associated with praying such as prostration and making the sign of the cross are in stark contrast to the kicking legs and fists thrown in the air. In total, the video makes use of subversive imagery and sound, aspects of which will be discussed further below. By bringing elements of performance that are normally restricted to the space outside the doors of the church right into the nave, Pussy Riot also challenges normative Christian Orthodox gender roles, notably the idea that women are politically passive.

The video was posted on *YouTube* on February 21, 2012, a few hours after five Pussy Riot members had been escorted out of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow where they had carried out a carefully planned happening filmed by anonymous associates. Despite this planning, after about 40 seconds of tumultuous action the whole

- 12 Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture, and Greater Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1; see also Davis, “The Russian Orthodox Church”; Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Marsh, *Religion and State*; Knox, “Church, State, and Belief”; Andrei E. Sebestov, “Religion in the System of State Power,” *Russian Social Science Review* 53/1 (2012); Nadezhda Kevorkova, “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Emerging Role,” *Telegraph (Russia Behind the Headlines)*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/6269877/The-Russian-Orthodox-Churchs-emerging-role.html>; Andrew Higgins, “Born Again: Putin and Orthodox Church Cement Power in Russia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2007. Dallago refers to ethnologist Olga Kazmina’s observation that by the late 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church successfully adopted an “isolationist” position emphasizing the historical ties between religion and Russian ethnicity, which gradually has led to a more widespread embrace of traditional values and national patriotism, see Christian Dallago, “The Russian Orthodox Church in the Post-Soviet Period: Challenges and Responses,” Kennan Institute/Wilson Center, April 25, 2011, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-russian-orthodox-church-the-post-soviet-period-challenges-and-responses#> (visited January 3, 2014).
- 13 Clifford Levy, “At the Expense of All Others, Putin Picks a Church,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2008; see also Michael Bourdeaux, “President Putin and the Patriarchs,” *The Times*, January 11, 2008; and Alexander Osipovich, “Piety’s Comeback as a Kremlin Virtue,” *The Moscow Times*, February 12, 2008.
- 14 Ksenia Radchenko, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Politics” (Review), *Slavic and East European Journal* 57/2 (2013), 329; see also Benjamin Bidder, “Pussy Riot Trial Sheds Light on Kremlin’s Religious Ties,” *Spiegel Online*, August 8, 2012.

thing was effectively brought to an end by cathedral guards, and the members of Pussy Riot were asked to leave.

Pussy Riot did not interrupt a service. Nothing was damaged, and nobody was physically hurt, which probably explains why nobody was immediately interrogated or arrested that night. A warrant for the arrest of the group members was effectuated only twelve days later, on Saturday March 3, 2012, and the timing of the warrant seems politically motivated – it was placed the day before the Sunday elections when Putin regained power. It resulted in the arrest of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadya) and Maria Alyokhina (Masha), with the arrest of Yekaterina Samutsevich (Katya), taking place a little later, on March 16. They were released before Christmas in December 2013. Now, the question remains: why should we continue paying attention to the Pussy Riot case? One answer might be this: there is much more to learn about the still-largely-undiscussed blasphemy accusation, not only in an un-secularized Russian context, but also in a general sense, as the concept of blasphemy as incitement to religious hatred cuts through a complex of music, media, art activism, censorship, and the relationship between politics and religion.

Based on a variety of sources, I discuss in this article the notion of blasphemy in relation to the charge of hooliganism and the idea that Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" constitutes a performance of the holy fool. In considering the politico-religious context, I argue that the video is a crucial part of Pussy Riot's media art activism and point to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a place of controversy where Pussy Riot's feminism has clashed with the reinvigorated virtues of Russian Mariology¹⁵ and re-established senses of sacred space.

As for the limitations of the discussion here, the specific areas of law, Russian law, and law philosophy, which I only briefly touch upon, will hopefully inspire other scholars who are more competent in these fields to pursue the discussion further.

The material for this article includes a variety of sources available on the Internet. Other than video material, I include excerpts of the closing courtroom statements, lyrics and other material published by Pussy Riot (in English translation), as well as international news reports and material from the official homepage of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The blasphemer as hooligan (khuligan)

The three identified Pussy Riot members were not charged with any formal blasphemy law, as none such existed at the time of the trial. They were charged with the catch-all paragraph of "hooliganism," which originates from late tsarist Russia. The meaning of the term hooliganism in the Russian context is interesting here, as it has been subject to considerable disagreement, as Neil Weismann explains: "For some it was synonymous with crime itself, applicable to all illegal acts. For others it connoted a particular attitude with which certain crimes were committed."¹⁶ And the charge

15 I return to the notion of Russian Mariology, a special kind of devotion to the Mother of God, below.

16 Neil B. Weissman, "Rural Crime in Tsarist Russia: The Question of Hooliganism, 1905-1914," *Slavic Review* 37/2 (1978), 228.

is still used today for prosecuting unauthorized behavior that involves open "rejection of and defiance to authority."¹⁷ For example, it was put to work against the West German teenager, Mathias Rust, who in 1987 flew a private Cessna-plane through the Russian "iron-curtain" and landed on the Red Square. For Pussy Riot, the hooliganism charge came with the crucial addition that the three women's acts were "motivated by religious hatred." This is merely one example of a widespread care for laws that can put an end to extreme speech, religious vilification, and seditious libel in many jurisdictions,¹⁸ yet the accusation of hooliganism in Russia also has specific historical meanings.

Around 1900 in rural Russia, Hooliganism referred to quite diverse crimes, including not only serious crimes such as rape and murder, but also "such "mischievous" acts as public obscenity, singing indecent songs (often to the accompaniment of accordions!)."¹⁹ A report on hooliganism from 1913 mentions "insolence toward cultured and propertied people" among the most common forms of hooliganism, and the clergy, who constituted a specific target, "were frequently described as victims of "blasphemous" hooligan acts, that ranged from beatings to the disruption of church services."²⁰ Pussy Riot did not interrupt any service or physically attack anybody, and stated that they "harbor no hatred towards Orthodox Christians," and that their motivation for the protest was "purely political and artistic."²¹ Moreover, members of Pussy Riot emphasize: "Our performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was a political gesture to address the problem of the Putin government's merger with the Russian Orthodox Church,"²² and maintain that it was not the intention to challenge churchgoers' religious convictions or devotional sentiments.²³ Thus Pussy Riot explicitly opposes the part of the verdict that, in the absence of a formal blasphemy law, appears to be a judicial approximation of the public and clerical accusations of blasphemy.

17 Madeleine Kruhly, "The Strange History of Russian Hooliganism," *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/the-strange-history-of-russian-hooliganism/260255/> (visited May 29, 2014).

18 See for example Hare, "Blasphemy and Incitement to Religious Hatred;" and Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy."

19 Weissman, "The Question of Hooliganism," 229; parenthesis original.

20 Weissman, "The Question of Hooliganism," 230. Weissman refers extensively to the detailed analysis (1913) of the nature of rural hooliganism produced by a special commission on hooliganism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the so-called Lykoshin commission.

21 Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, "Art and the Human Manifesto of Nadia Tolokonnikovoy," 2012, <http://www.freepussyriot.org/content/art-and-human-manifesto-nadia-tolokonnikovoy> (accessed February 17, 2014); these phrases have been widely quoted from a variety of sources.

22 This is the opening sentence of the group's open letter, "Art or Politics?," written shortly after the arrest of the three identified members on March 23, 2012; see The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom* (New York City: The Feminist Press at the University of New York, 2013), 15.

23 Tolokonnikova, "Art and the Human Manifesto"; Richard Boudreaux and Alexander Kolyandr, "Russian Band Found Guilty in Putin Protest," *The Wall Street Journal Online*, August 17, 2012; see also The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 117-118 ("Excerpts from the Appeal Statements").

The power of images

In applying Judith Halberstam's idea of "imagined violence" in feminist film studies to an understanding of the "Punk Prayer," I aim in this article to contribute to the general understanding of the dynamics of censorship: it is not so much the violent pictures, explicit lyrics or specific sounds that cause panic among authorities, rather it is the fear of what might come out of it. The imagination of what these Pussy Riot images, sounds and lyrics might inspire others to do poses a threat for which there is no solution in the "real", as it depends on how those in power imagine audiences' reactions. In this sense, censorship is an attempt to control public imagination.

According to Halberstam, the representation of violence through film has the power "not simply to effect change but to offer a potent challenge to the order of things."²⁴ Pussy Riot's Punk prayer includes violent gestures and the use of explicit, angry and aggressive language. Although they do not advocate literal aggression or violence in any strict sense, their video creates an imagined "place of rage," which might be seen as a "political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, [...] in popular film of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful [...] men."²⁵ Pussy Riot creates images that are meant to push the boundaries of what is possible to even imagine for Russian society. Halberstam identifies precisely what is at stake with images of powerful women, speaking and acting from positions otherwise occupied by men only, when she argues that "[i]magined violences create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act."²⁶ Furthermore, the idea that one of the "abiding divisions between the sacred and the profane is often seen reflected in the difference between male and female," is especially true for the Pussy Riot case: they staged their performance at the ambo,²⁷ which is intended for readings from the scripture and restricted to the (male) clergy only.

Performing the holy fool?

Pussy Riot's activist art is widely described in terms of performance. But how is it possible to understand the "Punk Prayer" video as a performance? "To perform is to carry something into effect," Deborah Kapchan asserts, and continues: "the notion of agency is implicit in the performance."²⁸ Therefore, to study the performance of Pussy

24 Judith Halberstam, "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance," in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 246.

25 Halberstam, "Imagined Violence," 247.

26 Halberstam, "Imagined Violence," 264.

27 In a traditional Byzantine church the ambo, or solea, refers to the raised platform in front of the iconostasis, typically a portable or stationary pulpit of some kind is involved; see Victor Davidoff, "The Witch Hunt against Pussy Riot," *The Moscow Times*, June 25, 2012, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-witch-hunt-against-pussy-riot/460968.html>; Pussy Riot did neither climb, nor jump, onto the altar as has been falsely, yet repeatedly, reported uncritically by the news media and some academic studies.

28 Deborah Kapchan, "Performance," *The Journal of American Folklore* 108/430 (1995), 479.

Riot demands a close look not only at what the performance consists of and what it aims at communicating, but also at what it carries into effect, that is, how its message is communicated and perceived. The video can be understood as a distinct performance genre (it is performed when watched on the Internet), which like other performance genres "are intertextual fields where the politics of identity are negotiated,"²⁹ and where social meaning is generated and performed.³⁰ The video points to social realities beyond itself: using global media for local purposes, addressing a global audience, and not primarily a Russian one, it brings international attention to violations of civil rights and censorship of political dissent in Russia.

Several scholars have aligned Pussy Riot with the notion of the holy fool.³¹ As Yngvar Steinholt has noted, footage for the "Punk Prayer" was shot during lent. In medieval times, lent was the carnival season. Medieval carnival "is known to have included mockery of church authorities, even swearing and indecent behavior from pulpits and altars,"³² thus suggesting Pussy Riot's appearance in the cathedral(s) in terms of the carnivalesque. And this, Steinholt observes, was acknowledged by parts of the clergy, willing to forgive Pussy Riot.³³ Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "the carnivalesque," is a "cultural expression that challenges reigning hierarchies with humor, parody, and subversive symbolism that draws on the "material lower bodily strata" in order to invert social categories.³⁴ One distinct point of inversion in the lyrics is the word "shit" or "crap," which plays a central role to the notion of blasphemy, as I will discuss below. The social categories put into play by Pussy Riot concern gender, religion, human rights, and politics. As a fixed performance, Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" (understood as video) aims at articulating a *post factum* staged spontaneity, which is meant to provoke and capture the viewers' emotional engagement. Much in line with Artaudian theater, Pussy Riot draws on specific gestures and postures associated with Orthodox practice *and* punk at the same time, in other words, "a language of anarchy which pushes the actor and the audience toward a questioning of "object relationships" (usually taken for granted) and thus toward chaos."³⁵

29 Kapchan, "Performance," 482.

30 Nicholas Cook, "Music as Performance," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (New York & London: Routledge, 2012), 185, 193.

31 See for example Nicholas Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary: An Analysis of Pussy Riot's Punk Performance in Moscow," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81/4 (2013); Timothy Beal, "Pussy Riot's Theology," *Chronicle of Higher Education/The Chronicle Review*, September 17, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Pussy-Riots-Theology/134398/>; Harvery Cox, "Of Ezekiel, Gandhi and Pussy Riot," *The Boston Globe*, August 26, 2012, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2012/08/25/persecuted-punk-band-pussy-riot-has-parallels-with-ezekiel-gandhi/amWpK80npB6iGOpbzHzLVI/story.html>; Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer," *Popular Music and Society* 36/1 (2013).

32 Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy," 123.

33 Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy," 123.

34 Kapchan, "Performance," 486 with reference to Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 368; see also Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 410-412.

35 Kapchan, "Performance," 481, with reference to Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (London: John Calder, 1970), 27.

The language of anarchy in the "Punk Prayer" is, at first glance, formed within the idiomatic, yet also stereotypical and well-established category of punk, aimed at questioning the State-Church relation. Yet, it seems also to contain a deliberate use of blasphemy markers, which acknowledges blasphemy as a *modus operandi*, while at the same time denying the possibility of "real" blasphemy. Denysenko notes that "the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1737 stipulated that those who "feign" holy foolery should be sent to a secular court."³⁶ Thus, whereas authentic holy fools and their prophetic voices are cherished by the Church,³⁷ those who pretend to be such should be persecuted. However, seen from the perspective of the carnival, where the deliberate and creatively-performed mocking of authorities is precisely the point, how would one discriminate between an authentic holy fool and just a fool?

Although smelling a bit of an apologia, Nadya Tolokonnikova claims to be inspired by holy folly. Linked to Pussy Riot's distinctive understanding of punk, she notes in her Closing Courtroom Statement: "We were searching for real sincerity and simplicity, and we found these qualities in the *yurodstvo* [the holy foolishness] of punk."³⁸ Here, punk supposedly functions as a "stylistically marked expression of otherness,"³⁹ and the notion of "simplicity" having proportions of childish *naïveté*, the truthfulness of which exposes the hypocrisy of the leaders.⁴⁰ If the accusation of blasphemy relates to a perceived transgression of the boundaries between sacred and profane properties, performing the holy fool in a punk costume might be understood as a means of suspending the logic of blasphemy. It is a "theatrical provocation,"⁴¹ which only shows Pussy Riot's ability to make use of the "visual part of a punk-kinetics and punk-aesthetics – which has for long been an established part of pop mass culture" – to further a political pun in their "YouTube-ready" video,⁴² as if the satire was so grotesque, hyperbolic, and gross⁴³ that nobody would ever dream of talking about blasphemy for real.⁴⁴

36 Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1081, with reference to Sergei Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 346-347; and Priscilla Hunt and Svitlana Kobets, ed., *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2011).

37 Among the most celebrated holy fools in the Russian tradition are St Basil the Blessed of Moscow and Blessed Xenia of Saint Petersburg; see Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 19; and Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1080.

38 The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 92; Tolokonnikova's Closing Courtroom Statement. The Russian word *yurodstvo* denotes in Byzantine hagiography the type of saint described in terms of the holy fool, who is "free, a stranger, naked, elusive, and prone to folly, whose ministry is to speak prophetically; Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1080 with reference to Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, 153-156.

39 Kapchan, "Performance," 479.

40 Cf. Beal, "Pussy Riot's Theology."

41 Julia Listengarten, "Profile: Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" and National Controversy," *Ecumenica: Journal of Theatre and Performance* 5/2 (2012), 67.

42 Zoladz, "Take Me Seriously."

43 On the grotesque and satire, see for example Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 303-304.

44 The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 43-44; Nadya Tolokonnikova notes in her Opening Courtroom Statement that they did not imagine that their actions would be offending.

The video and media art activism

Pussy Riot, the "performance art collective,"⁴⁵ takes on "the angry women in rock"-attitude⁴⁶ to communicate their political message and thus transform the punk-like "Riot Grrrl" spirit of the early 1990s into a new context for performance practice and communication: "Whereas riot grrrls communicated privately, Pussy Riot benefit from the connectedness of the digital world."⁴⁷ Most news media coverage around the globe has misleadingly talked about the event in terms of a concert, and about the video as a documentation of that event. Yet, as established by now, Pussy Riot's video cannot be seen as documentation of a live performance, rather, the heavily circulated video comes closest to constituting the real performance as it is part and parcel of the multi-media enterprise character of Pussy Riot's activism, here described by Polly McMichael:

Each stage of the group's public confrontation of the Putin state was a multimedia event par excellence: the group's members layered references to their artistic, theoretical, political and musical influences and their revolutionary, political objectives in a synthesis of sound-bites, photographs, manifesto-blogs, videos and interviews, all of which were curated and archived on the *LiveJournal* account pussy-riot.⁴⁸

Several writers and scholars have noted that "Pussy Riot's performances are meticulously designed for dissemination via the Internet,"⁴⁹ and rapid dissemination (of all their videos) via the internet seems to have been at the heart of Pussy Riot's media strategy,⁵⁰ the overall aim of which was to disturb the carefully controlled media image of the Russian presidency. As Russian art critic Maria Chehonadskih argues "One lesson of the Pussy Riot case," "lies in the fact that local activism and radical art can survive only if they are visible in media space."⁵¹ Other than making camera-friendly activist art, Pussy Riot and their crew of professionally skilled technicians and branding agents⁵² "knew

45 Brian Whitmore, "Pussy Riot: The Punk Band That Isn't and the Concert that Wasn't, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/pussy-riot-what-really-happened-russia-trial/24660925.html>.

46 Kristen Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic?: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26/1 (2003), 5.

47 Zoladz, "Take Me Seriously."

48 McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically," 101, see note 1 for links to the group's *LiveJournal* site.

49 Ivan Gololobov and Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Preface. The Elephant in the Room? Post-Socialist Punk and the Pussy Riot Phenomenon," *Punk & Post Punk* 1/3 (2012), 250; see also McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically;" Chehonadskih, "What Is Pussy Riot's 'Idea?';" Zoladz, "Take Me Seriously."

50 The "Punk Prayer" was the fifth actionist performance of Pussy Riot. For a brief overview of Pussy Riot's performances between late 2011 and February 2012, see for example Stephen Morgan, *Pussy Riot vs Putin: Revolutionary Russia* (Steven John Morgan, 2012), 20-24 with translated lyrics; lyrics are also translated in The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!:* "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away (Punk Prayer), 13-14;" "Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest," 25; "Kropotkin-Vodka," 30; "Putin has Pissed Himself," 36-37; and "Raze the Pavement," 48.

51 Chehonadskih, "What Is Pussy Riot's 'Idea?'," 4.

52 Chehonadskih refers to a meeting with "the secret director of the Pussy Riot performances," who emphasized the importance of "a tactical media technology which can borrow from pop culture and commercial advertisements;" see Chehonadskih, "What Is Pussy Riot's 'Idea?'," 5; see also Listengarten, "Profile: Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer,'" 69.

how to make things work, which means to put street politics into the field of technology and media.⁵³ In “post-shock society,” Chehonadskih’s word for the stagnant 2000s in Russia,

alternative politics is relegated to the ghetto and official public life is concentrated on the affirmative rituals of representatives of power. The only way to break the situation of passivity and silence is – somehow – to practice this hysterical and obscene speech. There are no other tools to use. This is why actionism became the main artistic movement in Russia and always had a strong political spirit. All the actions that were produced during this period depended on public scandal to distort the surface of a fake ‘stability’.⁵⁴

The Russian internet is described in terms of an “alternative public sphere,”⁵⁵ and its significance for activism: “as an alternative medium for information diffusion, communication and mobilization has grown markedly with the strengthening of state control over traditional media, particularly television, in the early twenty-first century.”⁵⁶ The performance of state power depends heavily on having control over the media that nourishes citizens’ imaginations of a strong nation. Based on Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation as “an imagined political community,” Halberstam’s idea of “imagined violence” might be understood here as the resistance to dominant political powers. Anderson explains that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁵⁷ Pussy Riot operates and communicates political statements through mediated networks; this is an appropriate means to oppose state control, and to challenge the unifying national narrative continually produced and aired through other mediated forms. Katya Samutsevitch speaks of the “Punk Prayer” video as a “media intrusion,”⁵⁸ and highlights the degree to which Putin’s political project depends on modern media technology and airtime on national television for hours of live broadcasts

Our sudden musical appearance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior with the song “Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away” violated the integrity of the media image that the authorities had spent such a long time generating and maintaining, and revealed its falsity. In our performance we dared, without seeking the patriarch’s blessing, to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the patriarch, and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia.⁵⁹

53 Chehonadskih, “What Is Pussy Riot’s ‘Idea’?”, 5.

54 Chehonadskih, “What Is Pussy Riot’s ‘Idea’?”, 4.

55 Chehonadskih, “What Is Pussy Riot’s ‘Idea’?”, 3.

56 Markku Lonkila, “The Internet and Anti-Military Activism in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60/7 (2008), 1126, 1131.

57 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991), 6; see also Halberstam, “Imagined Violence,” 252.

58 The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 89; Katya Samutsevitch’s Closing Courtroom Statement.

59 The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 89.

The explicit media self-consciousness of Pussy Riot should therefore not be overlooked. Pussy Riot is a perfect example of Russian art activists who have "turned communication media into their art media," a phenomenon that has a certain resemblance with what Norie Neumark calls "distance art/activism," where distance is "always multiple and relative in its configurations,"⁶⁰ but does not prevent audiences from engaging emotionally in what they see and hear. In the case of the "Punk Prayer," the distance between its production and the various meanings ascribed to it by a variety of audiences was treated as insignificant; in court it was totally neglected. A video might be "blasphemous" in much the same way as a live performance, as the performativity of the blasphemous work in the video is as much located within the audiences as within the performers.⁶¹ In line with Neumark's remarks on "distant art/activism" as "playfully serious and parodically truthful"⁶² it might also be productive not to focus on any singular meaning of "Punk Prayer," but rather on how it works, and the different reactions it has produced.

Blasphemy

Definitions of blasphemy are fluid and contested, and all are susceptible to manipulation by those positioned in power. Still, blasphemy "is fundamentally about transgression, about crossing the lines between the sacred and the profane in seemingly improper ways," as S Brendan Plate notes in his *Blasphemy: Art that Offends*.⁶³ Or, as Peter Olen has it, historical definitions of blasphemy typically "include some sort of religious reference."⁶⁴ These propositions imply that blasphemy requires someone positioned within a given religious or political power structure to define someone else's specific actions as blasphemous. Following Plate, who focuses on the power of images in art and film, it is only in specific contexts that images are identified as "blasphemous, sacrilegious, idolatrous, obscene, or immoral."⁶⁵ Moreover, a "blasphemous image needs both an artist and an accuser. The context for accusation includes everything from religious dogmatic assertions to media coverage to political posturing made by authorities seeking to appear as defenders of social decorum and morality."⁶⁶ Again, it is emphasized that accusations of blasphemy, like the boundaries between

60 Norie Neumark, "Introduction: Relays, Delays, and Distance Art/Activism," in *Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, ed. Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005), 3. Neumark's work concerns primarily distance art before the internet and mainly on projects of the 1970s and 1980s, but in my view, and to take serious Neumark's own remark of "the rich potentiality of the virtual," the notion of distant art might well be applicable to art activism on the Internet.

61 Cf. Neumark, "Distance Art/Activism," 15.

62 Neumark, "Distance Art/Activism," 17; Neumark refers here to the works of distance art/activism as "Deleuzian assemblages," focusing on *how* they work, rather than what their meaning is.

63 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 43.

64 Peter Olen, "Now, Is That Really Blasphemy? Heretical Meaning and Belief," *Florida Philosophical Review* 8/1 (2008), 33.

65 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 10.

66 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 50.

the sacred and the profane, always depend on specific historical contexts and religio-political agendas.

Blasphemy, then, depend on notions of sacred forms and spaces, however, as Gordon Lynch emphasizes, “sacred forms are historically contingent and under continual reproduction and contestation.”⁶⁷ Orthodox Christianity in today’s Russia has reintroduced “established notions of sacred space”⁶⁸ as expressed in neo-Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture; these accepted norms are intimately related to the sacred space that Pussy Riot was accused of desecrating. What blasphemy means in relation to the Pussy Riot case relates to “the nature and significance of what people take to be absolute, normative realities that exert claims on the conduct of social life.”⁶⁹ Hence, actions such as those of Pussy Riot that point to alternative modes of social conduct will also violate implied notions of sacredness.

The term blasphemy is of Greek origin (*vlasphemía*, or *vlastémia*, from *vlátto*, injure, and *phéme*, utterance, speech), the general meanings of which include uttering a curse, an unauthorized use of god’s name, holy persons, places, objects, or religious doctrines, and otherwise-expressed contempt for a religion or deity. Within general (Christian) theology, blasphemy is often understood as utterances that are deliberately or intentionally meant to mock or ridicule religious symbols or gods; this suggests that some charges of blasphemy rely on speculation about the *intention* on the offender’s part, a notion which will not fit into all definitions of the idea. The logic of blasphemy is traditionally rooted in the fear of god: if a society will not punish the blasphemer, god will punish society. More narrowly speaking, blasphemy is considered a sin committed against god (God) himself, in Mark 3:29 (the New Testament) described as the “eternal sin,” which means it is unforgivable. Blasphemy and sacrilege refer to unauthorized and incorrect actions (by some) in relation to something considered sacred or inviolable (by others), which means, again, that all instances of the sacred are specific as they are “woven through contemporary social life.”⁷⁰

The official website of the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church states the Church’s view of blasphemy: “In the Church’s tradition, blasphemy is understood as an outrageous or disrespectful action, statement or intention about God or a sacred thing [...] St. Paul describes blasphemers as those who made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim. 1:19), understanding blasphemy not only as an outrage against God or His holy name but also any act of falling away from the faith.”⁷¹ The website also emphasizes by use of quotes from the *Russian Orthodox*

67 Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 54.

68 Denysenko, “An Appeal to Mary,” 1065.

69 Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 5.

70 Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 2.

71 The site informs that these lines were adopted on February 4, 2011, by the *Bishop’s Council of the Russian Orthodox Church*; English translation original; see website of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, <https://mospat.ru/en/>. The site refers to several passages where blasphemy is mentioned in the biblical texts, for example Lev. 24:15; Ps. 74:18 in the Old Testament books; and Mk. 7:21-23; Jn. 10:33; Rev. 13:1 in the New Testament.

Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights, that "freedom is one of the manifestations of God's image in human nature," followed by a warning that it "is wrong however to use this freedom to oppose God who created man [...] Such resistance to the Creator destroys the order of the universe established by Him and leads to much distress and suffering."⁷² The website does not, however, specify exactly what blasphemous actions might look like. The actual accusations of blasphemy in relation to "Punk Prayer," which I will return to below, provide a clearer idea.

Jeremy Patrick, in his "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," demonstrates that blasphemy laws "maintain a surprisingly strong foothold in several jurisdictions,"⁷³ including the "defamation of religions" resolutions of the United Nations, and anti-blasphemy legislation in countries such as Ireland, Pakistan, Australia, Canada and England. In this sense, blasphemy concerns after 2000 is by no means solely a Russian phenomenon. Operating with three conceptualizations of blasphemy, a religious, a legal, and a secular or cultural concept, Patrick notes that the "ability of the religious groups to police their ranks and purge them of blasphemy depends on how much influence the religion has with civil authorities [...] With the assistance of the State, however, far more severe punishments become available."⁷⁴ Patrick also reminds us that "blasphemy is often thought of as something the irreligious do to the religious, but historically sincere differences in religious belief were the common cause of blasphemy prosecutions."⁷⁵

Somewhere in the discussion lurk ideas regarding intentionality: whether the intention of Pussy Riot to blaspheme will count or not, or whether the protest had a legitimate artistic or political purpose. While arguably part of their carnivalesque *modus operandi*, the Pussy Riot members have been careful to apologize to offended believers. Though offense was exactly the point of the style of the protest, blasphemy and desecration was arguably not an end in itself.

If one of the justifications for prohibiting blasphemous speech is fear of divine wrath, society can demonstrate that the blasphemous individuals do not represent the community as a whole. Yet, historically this "fear often operated alongside a far more diffuse anxiety that blasphemy undermined society itself."⁷⁶ The promotion of the dialogue between the public and its leaders "in service to the fatherland and the nation," is far more in concord with the patriarch's view of the role of the church in Russian political life, which is "the safeguarding of civil peace and accord in society."⁷⁷ This explicit concern for the "*Recasting [of] the Church as the True Guardian of the Nation*," in the patriarchal strategy – "one that is intended to preserve the Orthodox Church's dominant position" – amounts, in Davis' words, to "religious nationalism."⁷⁸ Illustrating the relevance of this point, a statement by a spokesman of the

72 <https://mospat.ru/en/>; English translation original.

73 Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," 190.

74 Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," 204-5.

75 Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," 208.

76 Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," 213.

77 Davis, "The Russian Orthodox Church," 665.

78 Davis, "The Russian Orthodox Church," 666, italics original.

Russian Orthodox Church, Vsevolod Chaplin, maintains that: "our ideal is the unity of the church and the authorities, and the unity of the people and the authorities."⁷⁹

Before turning to the specific blasphemy accusations, and how Pussy Riot was perceived as a threat to law, order, and normative social conduct in church, I find it worthwhile to take a look at the video in more detail.

The pseudo-documentary character of the video, or: what exactly does the video document?

The Pussy Riot video affords, on the one hand, the illusion of "privileged access"⁸⁰ to the live "Punk Prayer" performance. In a professionally edited pseudo-documentary style, it utilizes familiar aesthetics of the documentary, such as the shaky hand-held camera and grainy film quality which communicates immediacy and authenticity of the tumultuous events, as if the viewer is bearing witness to a slice of real life. Playing on the audience's awareness that they in fact *did it*, the video postulates one coherent live performance in the central cathedral of Moscow. Yet, as the different scenes in fact show, it was anything but coherent until footage shot at two different locations was aligned into one video and synched to the pre-recorded song in the subsequent editing process: The footage from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was edited together with footage from the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo (also in Moscow), made two days before, on 19 February.⁸¹

The news media has continuously – though misleadingly – described Pussy Riot's stunt in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a "concert." Brian Whitmore's analysis on *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* stands out from the majority of news articles on the case, hitting the head of the nail with the title: "Pussy Riot: The Punk Band that Isn't and the Concert that Wasn't."⁸² The activists do not comprise a punk band,⁸³ and did

79 Miriam Elder, "God Is Judging Pussy Riot, Says Russian Church Leader," *guardian.co.uk*, July 31, 2012.

80 Diane Raitlon and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 49; also Korsyn's dialogical analysis questions the "privileged position of spectator" in Kevin Korsyn, "Beyond Privileged Contexts: Intertextuality, Influence, and Dialogue," in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61.

81 According to the media group, *Interfax*, it was reported almost a month later, on 19 March, 2012, that the Spokesman of the Church, Vsevolod Chaplin, had recognized the interior as being the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo; see *Interfax* (no author), "Pussy Riot Gave a Concert in Yelokhovo Cathedral Two Days Before Their Action in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior," *Interfax*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=9161> (visited March 6, 2013).

82 Whitmore, "The Punk Band That Isn't."

83 In the news media, Pussy Riot has repeatedly been described in terms of a "band," see for example Caryn Riswold, "Pussy Riot = Feminism + Religion + Russia," the blog 'Feminismxianity' on the website *Patheos: Progressive Christian/Hosting the Conversation on Faith*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carynrswold/2012/11/pussy-riot-feminism-religion-russia/> (visited May 29, 2013), and Roy Schwartzman and Christie Maillet, "Riot Grrrl Feminist Counterculture from Sleater-Kinney to Pussy Riot," *Topical Problems in Communication and Culture* 15 (2013). Pussy Riot has also been called "punk rockers" and "punkers" (James Brooke, "Russia Frees One Punk Rocker, Keeps Two in Jail," *Voice of America*, October 10, 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/articleprint-view/1523761.html>), "fem-punkers" (Joshua Foust, "The Kony-ification of Pussy Riot," *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/08/the-kony-ification-of-pussy-riot/261262/>), a "feminist punk rock group" (CBC News (no author), "Hot Docs: Pussy Riot:

not perform a concert or a "gig,"⁸⁴ a word for a paid job in the entertainment business, to be precise – not an equivalent for Pussy Riot's unsanctioned acts. Assuming that the point was to make just enough footage for a video to be shown to an online audience, the Pussy Riot members and their technical crew got what they came for, as they acted promptly and were well coordinated. Guitars, portable amplification equipment and microphones served the sole purpose of acting as "visual signifiers of live performances"⁸⁵ in the edited video context. The musical immediacy is, as suggested, deceptive. For example, the sound of a piano is prominent, but there is no sign of a piano in the video; also, microphones and plugged-in guitars are only visible in the scenes shot at the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo, not in the images from the Christ the Savior Cathedral. Thus the audio functions much like a sound track to a montage of different sequences, like in many commercial music videos, even though it postulates the authenticity of the filmed event. As McMichael puts it, the sequences act "as transparent traces of what Pussy Riot had actually done in front of their live audiences."⁸⁶

The Head of Amnesty International in Moscow appropriately characterized the stunt as a "pantomime,"⁸⁷ as opposed to a "real" punk performance. But the questioning of the authenticity of the documentary had the strategic purpose of reducing the sentence facing the accused, the logic of the argument being that if they had not performed the song "live," they were less guilty. By contrast, the prosecutors seem to have taken the authenticity of the video for granted during the trial and insisted on the primacy of a live performance.

The only words audible on the video, unmistakably stemming from the activists themselves, are from the so-called crap-chorus: "crap, crap, this holiness, crap" (shouted in Russian: "Sran' gospodnia!"), directed at Putin and the authorities. At 1:35 in the original footage⁸⁸ some kind of playback device can be seen, which is grabbed by a guard and carried aside. This happens before the semi-chaotic actions on the ambo in front of the iconostasis which lasted no more than 40 seconds, as can also be witnessed in the original footage.

The video opens, intersects, and ends with a melodic line which, I imagine, must be both familiar and unfamiliar to Russian audiences: familiar, because it is the sound of

A Punk Prayer, High Five: An Adoption Saga," *CBC News*, April 25, 2013), "feminist punk collective" (Zoladz, "Take Me Seriously"), "punk provocateur band" (Natalya Vasilyeva, "Women Behind the Mask of Russia's Pussy Riot Band," *US News*, August 16, 2012, http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2012/08/16/women-behind-the-mask-of-russias-pussy-riot-band_print.html), a "Moscow guerilla punk band" (Bidder, "Kremlin's Religious Ties") and "guerilla feminist punk collective" (Beal, "Pussy Riot's Theology"). Often Pussy Riot members present themselves in line with these characterizations.

84 See for example [85 McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically," 107.](http://filmacademytv.mirocommunity.org/video/120/pussy-riot-gig-at-christ-the-s; see also reference in footnote 88.</p>
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86 McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically," 105.

87 McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically," 108-109; for a similar argument, see Nicolas Tochka, "Pussy Riot, Freedom of Expression, and Popular Music Studies after the Cold War," *Popular Music* 32/2 (2013), 304.

88 See and listen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBlSkpDWQ>

the first 8 bars from Rachmaninov's "Ave Maria" from his work *Vespers, or All Night Vigil*, Opus 37 (1915); unfamiliar, because it is Pussy Riot's altered version with female voices in Russian polyphonic hymnody style accompanied by a piano. This part of the Rachmaninov hymn that frames the piece as an invocation to the Mother of God is based on the Orthodox liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom (4th Century). It originates from pre-reform Russia and is praised as one of the greatest musical achievements within Orthodox liturgical music, "which enjoyed a brief blossoming period in Moscow, to disappear abruptly with the advent of the revolution."⁸⁹ Addressing the historical circumstances, Maes argues that "no composition represents the end of an era so clearly as this liturgical work."⁹⁰ The act of quoting this much-loved piece of music plays on the familiarity of it, albeit in a quite unorthodox fashion, while changing certain key elements.⁹¹

Sincere or not, changing the original lyrics to "Virgin Mary, Mother of God, please be a feminist," becomes a way to claim the prayer as common heritage, as a voice owned by everybody, and therefore suitable for promoting even feminist ideas. Yet, it also functions as a historical and political comment, in the sense that Pussy Riot compares Putin's administration with the Soviet era which tried to control people's belief and religious practices; at least the lyrics' references to the KGB points in this direction.⁹²

Lyrics: "Punk Prayer"⁹³

(prayer)	Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away, put Putin away, put Putin away!	[00:00-]
(verse 1)	Black robe, golden epaulettes, all parishioners crawl to bow. The phantom of liberty is in heaven, Gay Pride sent to Siberia in chains	[00:15]
(verse 2)	The head of KGB, their chief saint, leads protesters to prison under escort. Don't offend His Holiness, ladies, stick to making love and babies.	[00:29]

89 Frances Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 206.

90 Maes, *A History of Russian Music*, 206.

91 For the Lyrics, see below.

92 It is well-known that the Moscow Patriarchate was virtually a subsidiary organization to the KGB in the Soviet period, and that cooperation continues: President Putin served KGB in 1975-1991 and was head of the successor of KGB, the FSB, before becoming president; Moscow's Patriarch Kirill has a past in the KGB, and his predecessor, Patriarch Aleksey II, was allegedly a first generation KGB agent since 1958 (James Meek, "Russian Patriarch 'Was KGB Spy'," *The Guardian*, February 12, 1999), even though this is denied by the spokesman of the church, Chaplin.

93 I mainly follow Nicholas Denysenko's translation (Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1069), except for the crap-chorus, which I take from Carol Rumens (Carol Rumens, "Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer Is Pure Protest Poetry," *The Guardian*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/20/pussy-riot-punk-prayer-lyrics>), and for Verse 2, line 3 I use a mix of the two, whereas Verse 2, line 4 is Rumens' rhyme, which I prefer to Denysenko's: "Women must give birth and love."

(crap-chorus)	Crap, crap, this godliness crap! Crap, crap, this holiness crap!	[00:39]
(prayer)	Virgin Mary, Mother of God, become a feminist, become a feminist, become a feminist.	[00:47]
(verse 3)	The Church's praise of rotten dictators. The cross-bearer procession of black limousines. A teacher-preacher will meet you at school. Go to class, bring him money!	[01:06]
(verse 4)	Patriarch Gundyaev believes in Putin. Bitch, better believe in God instead. The belt of the Virgin can't replace mass-meetings. Mary, Mother of God, is with us in protest!	[01:16]
(crap-chorus)	Crap, crap, this godliness crap! Crap, crap, this holiness crap!	[01:26]
(prayer)	Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away, put Putin away, put Putin away!	[01:34] [-01:52]

In the Cathedral of Christ the Savior the cameras are focused on the action in front of the iconostasis and the heavenly doors, which lead to the altar. Only four of the five members can be seen in the edited music video. In the released raw footage, the fifth member (later identified as Katya Samutsevitch) is seen trying to get to the others while handling her guitar⁹⁴ – but she is escorted out and is never really part of the “performance.” This fact was later established in court and became the argument that got her out of prison on probation in the appeal case on October 10, 2012. In the footage from the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo, the camera angle is different, the interior of the church is different, and we see six Pussy Riot members dressed in different clothing. These scenes include much more “musical action,” with microphones and guitar playing, giving the scenes from this church a clearer sense of a concert performance.

Judging from the color combinations of the costumes of the Pussy Riot members, one gets the impression of a church swarmed by 10 or 11 rioting female punk rockers (Katya Samutsevitch's outfit is seen in both shootings). But only five members were reported to have been escorted out of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Yet, in the trial and the unofficial blasphemy accusations, as well as for most of the Western press, the possible impact of the video on the public imagination of what happened in the cathedral is completely ignored. However, my concern here is not really whether the pseudo-documentary images and sounds in the video did or did not convincingly blur the boundary between representation and reality. Because blasphemy appears as a phenomenon somewhere between the production and reception of the video, the real issue is that the *outré* utterances, sounds and kinetics on the video constitute, to some

94 The clip can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBLskpDWQ>.

audiences, blasphemous actions that are real enough in themselves, as they violate established notions of Orthodox sacred space in a neo-Byzantine church-design. Although I address the video as a pseudo-documentary, I should also clarify that it does document a very important aspect of the event: namely the scuffle or fight between the Pussy Riot members and the church officials, as if saying: "Look, they are throwing us out!" In this way, Pussy Riot let personnel representing church and state expose themselves as if on hidden camera. This seems to involve ideas about how to convincingly create a scandal in a church. I deliberately use the expression "playing" (with notions of blasphemy) as the "Punk Prayer" is performed (in the video as well as in the imaginary space of the cathedral) in that hard-to-define area, where the contingent boundaries of the profane and the sacred are always negotiated and fueled by those in power, who see the blasphemy argument serving their political ends.

Blasphemy accusations

Vsevolod Chaplin, acting as spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, stated that it was "a sin against God and it is God that is judging it [...] when symbols are overthrown and others are put in their stead, people want to say: we've taken power here. All these acts around symbols are attempts to redistribute power."⁹⁵ In the Orthodox Church, the patriarch is considered a symbol of the Church, and a sin committed against him is a sin directed against god. Blasphemy accusations have been expressed widely in public by patriarchal or ecclesiastical representatives and by individuals, whose statements have been referenced in the press both inside and outside Russia. The state-run *Rossiia* television channel repeatedly referred to the women as "blasphemers."⁹⁶ The western news media, by and large, gave a lot of attention to very negative reactions from the Russian public. For example, it has been reported that in Russia "many people were offended," and that they were "genuinely outraged."⁹⁷ However, neither Russians nor all people within the Russian Orthodox Church have been unified in the question.⁹⁸ The members of Pussy Riot were not the only Russians disturbed when Kyrill, in a speech before the presidential election, described Putin as

95 Elder, "God Is Judging."

96 Young, "Putin Goes to Church."

97 Lizzie Seal, "Pussy Riot and Feminist Cultural Criminology: A New 'Femininity in Dissent'?", *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice* 16/2 (2013), 297; see also Daniel Sandford, "Pussy Riot Jail Terms Condemned as 'Disproportionate'," *BBC News*, August 17, 2012.

98 For example, in an open letter (the now former) Deacon Sergei Baranov has expressed his critique of the Church's stance against Pussy Riot, causing the regional clergy to defrock him; see Laura Mills, "Orthodox Russian Deacon Stands up for Pussy Riot," *Yahoo News*, September 18, 2012, http://news.yahoo.com/orthodox-russian-deacon-stands-pussy-riot-130801344.html;_ylc=X3oDMTNu-NzgyaGdjBF9TAzIzNDU4NjgyNzQEQYWN0A21haWxfY21EY3QDYQRpbNRSa3VzBGxhbmcDZW4tVVMecGtnAzMzMjE4ZWU1LWE4OGMtMzQ0Ny1hNDdjLTl0YmQxZGVhMG10NQZRzZWM-DbWl0X3NoYXJlBHNsawNtYWYsBHRlc3QD;_ylv=3. Tayler reports that 42% of Russians considered the "Punk Prayer" an attack on the Church, while only 19% saw it as a protest against Putin, see Jeffrey Tayler, "What Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' Really Said," *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562/>

a "miracle of God."⁹⁹ Verse 4 of the "Punk Prayer" addresses this famous line, reminding the patriarch (whose civil name is Gundyayev) that he should believe in God, not in Putin. Also in court, Masha Alyokhina parodied the Church for completely missing the point when they refer to John 10:33, where the Jews say to Jesus: "We are ... stoning you ... for blasphemy." That is, the term applies to the son of god himself.¹⁰⁰ The official indictment presented in court contains several "opinionated adjectives," Daria Zagvizdina argues; Pussy Riot's actions are for example described as "devilish."¹⁰¹ Although the indictment does not make explicit use of the term blasphemy, there is no shortage of these "opinionated adjectives" commonly associated with, or used as, synonyms for blasphemous action or speech. Zagvizdina refers to details from the bill of indictment, published in *Novaya Gazeta* on July 19, 2012, according to which the gestures seen in the "Punk Prayer" video are described as "sassy," "vulgar," "licentious," "inappropriately sexual," and "sexually debauched", as performers "jumped, lifted their legs, imitating a dance and hitting imaginary adversaries with their fists," emphasizing that the "high lift of the legs" was "higher than the belt line." The indictment argued that the group aimed "to devalue church traditions and dogmas" and "to diminish the creed of believers."¹⁰²

Easily discernible in practically any language, the word "crap" (or as it has been more widely translated, "shit") appearing in what I refer to as the crap-chorus of the "Punk Prayer," has played a central role in the blasphemy controversy. The word has been seen as a "blaspheme towards Jesus Christ," and the small number of "victims" presented in court as witnesses stated that they felt offended by what they experienced, and described what they saw as "a parody of believers' actions" when the activists crossed themselves.¹⁰³ "Crap" or "shit" is not compatible with "holiness" or "godliness" here and clearly violates ideas about the sacred if read in this way. The Russian word "sran" has mostly been translated as "shit," yet in English, as Carol Rumens argues, "crap" has "a stronger metaphorical dimension than 'shit' and comes a shade closer to 'bullshit'."¹⁰⁴ In line with this interpretation, the chorus simply says that the State-Church relation is bullshit, not that the Lord is shit.

The activists' clothes were described by Russian investigators as "clearly contradicting the common rules of the church and demands of order, discipline, and church practice [...] in particular the face masks and short dresses, showing certain parts of the body."¹⁰⁵ Not least the conclusion of the indictment is of interest here as it aligns state and religion: in sum, the Pussy Riot member's actions gave the judge the impression of "a deliberately malevolent [...] event to debase the feelings and beliefs of

99 Thomas Grove, "Pussy Riot Reveals Rift in Russian Orthodox Church," *reuters.com*, August 15, 2012.

100 The Feminist Press, *Pussy Riot!*, 110; the "Closing Courtroom Statement by Masha."

101 Daria Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted for Licentious Dance and High Kicks," *gazeta.ru*, July 19, 2012, http://en.gazeta.ru/news/2012/07/19/a_4686637.shtml; see also Davidoff, "The Witch Hunt."

102 Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted;" some of these are also quoted in Listengarten, "Profil: Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer'," 68.

103 Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted."

104 Rumens, "Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer."

105 All quoted in Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted."

the numerous believers of the Orthodox Christian faith, and diminishing the spiritual foundations of the state."¹⁰⁶

This wording is repeated in the July 2012 indictment against all three women by the public prosecutor, which, as mentioned, was published by *Novaya Gazeta*.¹⁰⁷ But the critical voice of 'Forum 18' has noted a curious change of these words in a later version of the verdict by Judge Marina Syrova of Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court on August 17, 2012. In the revised version, rather than "disparaging the spiritual foundations of the state," the defendants are found to have "violated the constitutional foundations of the state" by inciting religious hatred.¹⁰⁸ This seems to suggest that the senior state authority "was not motivated to prosecute by moral outrage."¹⁰⁹ To the analysts of 'Forum 18', this inconsistency suggests that "state support for the Moscow patriarchate in [the Pussy Riot] case is tactical rather than principled," and it is emphasized that, under the 1993 constitution, "The Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one."¹¹⁰

So, whereas the first official version of the indictment seems affected by the publicly expressed cries of blasphemy, the later version, which is hardly known to the public, seems after all, to downplay ties between state, religion or belief, and Church: it is no longer as visible that the hooliganism charge functioned as a synonym for blasphemy charges. Only the first version of the indictment might read "as if Pussy Riot were being charged with blasphemy," Russian writer Davidoff argues, characterizing the trial against Pussy Riot as a "witch hunt."¹¹¹ In this way, the trial and the first version of the verdict can be seen as a way for the court to satisfy the civil and clerical accusers, by making a spectacle out of it. Arguably a more important reason for letting the notion of "blasphemy" echo so widely in court, press and public space, might have been to drown the political value of the group's protest through an emotional appeal to the public's religious sentiment. If it ever was, blasphemy is no longer, limited to the religious sphere, rather, "blasphemy and its accusations are integrated into a new dimension of sacred entities: freedom of expression [...] and most prominently, the nation-state."¹¹² The religious notion of blasphemy is translated into the secular phrasing of insult against religious sentiment, but on a practical level, rather than being erased, the blasphemy prohibition is transported into the concern for believers' religious sentiment. As Patrick demonstrates, blasphemy and religious vilification or hatred is not the same thing: "the two offenses have different historical antecedents, ad-

106 Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted."

107 'Forum 18', "Russia: Pussy Riot, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Religion or Belief," *portal-credo.ru*, October 25, 2012, <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=english&id=454>; for the *Gazeta*-reference, see Zagvizdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted." 'Forum 18' is a Norwegian (and Christian) human rights organization; their name is based on Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which addresses the freedom of thought, belief and religion.

108 'Forum 18', "Russia: Pussy Riot, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Religion or Belief."

109 'Forum 18', "Russia: Pussy Riot, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Religion or Belief."

110 'Forum 18', "Russia: Pussy Riot, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Religion or Belief," with reference to article 14.1 of the Constitution of The Russian Federation.

111 Davidoff, "The Witch Hunt."

112 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 57.

dress different perceived threats, and, most importantly, are distinguishable (theoretically) on the ground that blasphemy attacks beliefs, while religious vilification/hatred attacks believers."¹¹³

The maneuver of cutesifying, infantilizing, and sexualizing the women with the use of phrases like "punkettes," "girls,"¹¹⁴ and "a daring performance-artist with Angelina Jolie lips,"¹¹⁵ has been another strategy to neglect the political aspects of the "Punk Prayer" – just as the Russian state media coverage has "marginalized their critiques in order to drain them of their political value."¹¹⁶ Sexualized portrayals of women "are a way to 'manage' and 'contain' their power,"¹¹⁷ yet, in line with so-called "choice feminism,"¹¹⁸ and as part of their photogenic pussy-power image and media friendly brand, the female Pussy Riot bodies are themselves portrayed in a kind of sexualized rebel-fashion: slim fit dresses and tights, fashion style combat boots and naked shoulders.

The cathedral as a place of controversy

The question of topography and topology is crucial to understanding the "Punk Prayer"-controversy. As mentioned, the video postulates a single event that took place in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The final scene shows an outside view of the cathedral,¹¹⁹ as if making sure that nobody would miss the point. The sites chosen for Pussy Riot's earlier activist performances have all been "historical sites with a thorny past,"¹²⁰ a notion that certainly holds true for the cathedral. In her closing courtroom statement, Katya Samutsevitch emphasizes why the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was intentionally selected as a site for the protest:

That the Cathedral of Christ the Savior has become a significant symbol in the political strategy of authorities was clear to many [non-conformist] thinking people when Vladimir Putin's former [KGB] colleague Kirill Gundyayev took over as the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church. After this happened, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior began to be used openly as a flashy backdrop for the politics of the security forces, which are the main source of political power in Russia.¹²¹

113 Patrick, "The Curious Persistence of Blasphemy," 216.

114 Julia Ioffe, "How Three Young Punks Made Putin Blink," *New Republic*, August 17, 2012, <http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/plank/106281/how-three-young-punks-made-putin-blink>.

115 Vasilyeva, "Women Behind the Mask;" see also Sarah Kendzior, "Manic Pixie Dream Dissidents," *Registan*, August 18, 2012, <http://registan.net/2012/08/18/manic-pixie-dream-dissidents/> (visited May 29, 2013); or see *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/08/manic-pixie-dream-dissidents-how-the-world-misunderstands-pussy-riot/261309/> (visited May 29, 2013).

116 Kendzior, "Manic Pixie Dream Dissidents."

117 Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner, "Images of Powerful Women in the Age of 'Choice Feminism,'" *Journal of Gender Studies* 22/1 (2012): 66.

118 Hatton and Trautner, "Images of Powerful Women," 65.

119 See the video at [01:50-01:52].

120 Listengarten, "Profile: Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer"," 69.

121 *The Feminist Press, Pussy Riot!*, 87.

Though Pussy Riot stated their intentions *post factum*, these only strengthen readings of the “Punk Prayer” as a *political* protest, which by necessity was staged in the sacred space of the church in order to communicate its message.

The Epiphany Cathedral at Yelokhovo,¹²² where Pussy Riot shot the first footage for the video, is considered one of the most important cathedrals in Moscow together with the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Kremlin Cathedrals, and the huge Dorogomilovo Cathedral. When these cathedrals were closed or destroyed under the Soviet regime, the chair of the Russian Orthodox Church moved to the Epiphany Cathedral at Yelokhovo until the consecration of the reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2000. The national television broadcast¹²³ from the Epiphany Cathedral of the first post-Soviet Christmas and Easter night services with President Yeltsin (1991-1999) has not diminished its prestigious position in the late history of Russian Orthodoxy.

Competing versions of Russia’s Orthodox past can be illustrated by the controversy over the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. This was “an emblematic event in postcommunist Russia’s effort to come to terms with its totalitarian past,”¹²⁴ while the decision to finally build the cathedral was made in 1832 to celebrate Russia’s victory over Napoleon in 1812, it took half a century to complete it. The nineteenth-century construction was a glorification of the unity of the state, Christian Orthodoxy, and the Russian people, combining the idea of “Holy Russia” with that of the modern nation-state.¹²⁵ In 1931, it was spectacularly demolished by Stalin,¹²⁶ who envisioned a shrine to the victorious atheism, a shrine that was never built.¹²⁷

The late twentieth-century rebuilding of the cathedral was not only an official attempt at reconciliation and redemption, it became a strong symbol of “national spiritual renaissance.”¹²⁸ However, it is also a symbol of shifting and diverging political agendas. Critical voices accused members of the church and Moscow officials involved in the reconstruction of “falsification of historical heritage.” Satirical characterizations such as “vulgar imitation”¹²⁹ and “the cathedral of vanity” have pointed to the show

122 The original church was founded in the years 1722-31 in Yelokhovo, which at the time was a village near Moscow. The present shape of the cathedral dates to 1837-45. It is also known as Bogoyavlensky Cathedral, see McMichael, “Defining Pussy Riot Musically,” 108.

123 Cathy Young (Young, “Putin Goes to Church”) mentions the “millennial anniversary of Russia’s conversion to Christianity in 1988” (under President Gorbachev) as the occasion for “the first-ever broadcast of church services on Soviet television.”

124 Ekaterina V. Haskins, “Russia’s Postcommunist Past: The Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Reimagining of National Identity,” *History & Memory* 21/1 (2009), 26.

125 Haskins, “Russia’s Postcommunist Past,” 35.

126 Approximately 77.000 churches were destroyed in the period between 1918 and 1940, and tens of thousands of priests and laity repressed or executed; see Davis, “The Russian Orthodox Church,” 659. After the failed attack of the Germans to conquer Russia in 1941, Stalin initiated a revival of the Russian Orthodox Church as a strategic means to foster renewed patriotic support for the war. The influence of the Church grew until 1959 when Khrushchev’s started a new rally against the Church and reinserting priests with ties to the KGB.

127 Only later – under the rule of Khrushchev – the rubbles were moved away, and the largest heated public swimming pool seen on the planet was built on the foundation of the old cathedral.

128 Haskins, “Russia’s Postcommunist Past,” 27.

129 Haskins, “Russia’s Postcommunist Past,” 46.

business character of the reconstruction, suggesting that it constituted indulgence rather than redemption.¹³⁰ Not only was it "the biggest religious construction site of the end of the twentieth century," it is "an exact replica of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in reinforced concrete," and equipped with modern conveniences such as an underground parking lot and elevators, one of which would bring VIPs "from the parking lot directly to the altar."¹³¹

Clearly, the reconstruction is ambiguous. The imitation of the neo-Byzantine cathedral, "strives to obliterate Soviet history and restore the continuity between pre-revolutionary and Post-Soviet Russia. Inadvertently, it reveals a clear continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet times in terms of power structures and authoritarian fantasies."¹³² The government's choices regarding other symbolic negotiations of Soviet trauma manifested what Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia."¹³³ Hence the emergence of a new patriotic discourse: "The cathedral's neo-Byzantine architecture and décor imply a return to a mythical Russian past before the time of Peter the Great, a time of saints and warrior princes who had defended "mother Russia" from external enemies."¹³⁴ For the millennium celebration, Putin also had the old Soviet national anthem restored with new lyrics, emphasizing the restorative nostalgia lyrically. For example, the phrase: "the victory of communism's deathless ideas," gave way to "a land watched over by God."¹³⁵

Riot and relic: feminism and the belt of Bogoroditsa

The Mother of God (in Russian, *Bogoroditsa*) is called upon in the video to fight for women's or feminists' rights in Russia. This message is crucial in the "Punk Prayer," which draws on the historical and now reinvigorated importance of the Mother of God as the protector of the Russian people. A few months before Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer," and relating directly to Pussy Riot's protest, the devotion to the Mother of God, came to a climax. In her exhaustive study on Marian iconography in Byzantium, Bissera Pencheva asserts that Mary (the Mother of God) "emerges as an image of the protector of the imperial throne in the eighth century."¹³⁶ This Byzantine Marian devotion coupled with the notion of imperial power was imported into the Russian soteriological narrative, where Mary was placed at the heart of not only religious, but

130 Haskins, "Russia's Postcommunist Past," 47. The cost of the reconstruction project was officially estimated at over \$500 million, although, Haskins asserts, "the actual figure was likely to be significantly higher." But even the original cathedral built in neo-Byzantine fashion in the middle of the nineteenth century, was not perceived as ancient, rather, it was regarded as "nouveau riche," and "a vulgar but expensive brooch on the city's facade," see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 102.

131 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 106.

132 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 106-7.

133 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 40-41.

134 Haskins, "Russia's Postcommunist Past," 49.

135 Young, "Putin Goes to Church."

136 Bissera Pencheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 15-16; Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1072.

also national identity.¹³⁷ Skipping to the late 1970s and early 1980s, sporadic and not overly successful *Mariya* movements “urged [...] women to model themselves on the self-sacrificing Mary the Mother.”¹³⁸ Lately, the general invigoration of Orthodoxy in Russia has spawned a renewed interest in the veneration of icons,¹³⁹ and in saints and new martyrs,¹⁴⁰ as well as a monastic revival within Russia¹⁴¹ and abroad,¹⁴² most notably at the Holy Mountain of Athos in Northern Greece, where the Russian monastery of Agios Panteleimonos after decades of neglect is now being restored.¹⁴³ In line with this, a veritable Maria-mania has appeared, and this new appeal to the Mother of God – as it relates to Byzantine tradition and the early history of Russian Orthodox Christianity – is also aligned with “praising female altruism,”¹⁴⁴ and proclamations of the “return of women to the family.”¹⁴⁵ Putin’s reaction to the verdict is in striking accordance with this observation: “If they had not broken the law, they would now be at home, doing their housework.”¹⁴⁶

In 2011, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior hosted the Belt of the All-Holy Mother of God, believed to have been worn by the “historic protectress of the Russian people, who they believe intercedes for them before God’s throne.”¹⁴⁷ The belt (Belt) belongs to the Greek Orthodox monastery of Vatopedi, situated at the Holy Mountain in Northern Greece.¹⁴⁸ Over three million citizens and pilgrims were reported to have

137 Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2004), 244-246; see also Denysenko, “An Appeal to Mary,” 1074-5.

138 Fran Markovitz, “Striving for Femininity: (Post-) Soviet Un-Feminism,” *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 16/1 (1995), 40; see also Tatyana Mamonova, “Introduction: The Feminist Movement in the Soviet Union,” in *Women and Russia*, ed. Tatyana Mamonova (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

139 Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution*.

140 Karin Hylldal Christensen, “Remembering the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia.” In *Rethinking the Space for Religion: New Actors in Central and Southeast Europe on Religion, Authenticity and Belonging*, ed. Catharina Raudvere, Krzysztof Stala, and Trine Stauning Willert (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), 193-234.

141 Stella Rock, “A Monastic Revival: The Russian Orthodox Church,” *History Today* 59/2 (2009); in 1988, the Russian Orthodox Church listed 21 monasteries, by 2005 this number had increased to 688; see Irina Papkova, “The Orthodox Church and Civil Society in Russia (Review Article),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9/2 (2008), 481.

142 Sebestov, “Religion in the System of State Power,” 37.

143 President Putin himself paid Greece an official visit in 2005 and “devoted time to this issue;” see Sebestov 2012: 37. Based on my own observations from fieldwork at Mount Athos between 1997 and 2013, the number of Russian pilgrims to Mount Athos and new settlers in the villages Ouranoupolis near the Athonite border has increased dramatically over the last five or six years.

144 Suvi Salmenniemi, “Civic Activity – Feminine Activity?: Gender, Civil Society and Citizenship in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Sociology* 39/4 (2005), 746.

145 See discussion in Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, “Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society: Western Frames and Cultural Differences,” *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 55/1 (2003), 58-59.

146 United Press International (no author), “Pussy Riot Video Banned,” *upi.com*, November 29, 2012.

147 Denysenko, “An Appeal to Mary,” 1067.

148 In a recent publication about the monastery’s spiritual and communal achievements, four pages are devoted to photographic documentation of the event (Vatopedi, *Spiritual and Social Offering: 25 Years (1987-2012)*, in Greek, 2012: 150-153), for example, the abbot, Fr. Ephraim, is pictured leaving the airplane holding the shrine with the belt himself; another photograph pictures the now president Putin with Fr. Ephraim in front of the belt shrine at the Pulkovo airport of Saint Petersburg, where he welcomed the monastic delegation from Vatopedi.

venerated the belt – including the president and high-ranking politicians – between October 20 and November 28 when it was hosted by the cathedral. Many of those who came to venerate the belt waited in line for more than 17 hours.¹⁴⁹ No other single event has so clearly emphasized the importance of this cathedral to revitalized notions of Russian sacred space and power.

The last line of Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" is a response to this event: "the belt of the Virgin can't replace mass-meetings," which points to the official television coverage of the event, which totally overshadowed the pre-election political debate. As Denysenko points out: "Pussy Riot's punk prayer performance seriously undermined the Russian Church's strategy by subverting Kyrill's orchestration of grand events inviting the Russian people to return to Christianity under Mary's patronage."¹⁵⁰ While Kyrill I attempts to reconstitute a Russian society populated with devoted people, Pussy Riot asks Mary to become a feminist and protect the marginalized. This idea is not new to the history of Marian devotion, Denysenko argues, since "Russian Marian icons present the narratives of those who had little voice in the church establishment."¹⁵¹ Yet, in "Punk Prayer," Pussy Riot is revamping the traditional idea of the Mother of God, in order to tell their story, seeing her figure as a "powerful, feminine spiritual force"¹⁵² to further their fight for the rights of women, homosexuals and feminists. They aired their protest on the internet while "the memory of the veneration of the Marian relic and the Church's communication of its significance to the public was fresh."¹⁵³

The victims presented in court all agreed in their testimony that "feminism is not the fight for women's rights but the destruction of family."¹⁵⁴ The term feminism is a "contested terrain"¹⁵⁵ in Russian society. In the Soviet period, "socialist emancipation," and "equality" for women meant full-time work inside and outside the household, resulting in negative connotations associated with "state feminism."¹⁵⁶ Rather than being rooted in a communist version of Russian feminism, Pussy Riot's feminism is founded on women's and gender studies which arose in major cities in Russia at the beginning of the nineties, when scholarly theory imported from the west emerged as a new authority – a sign of "intellectual globalization and western colonization" of critical thinking.¹⁵⁷ Pussy Riot's protest is presented as secular feminism by the authori-

149 Vatopedi, *Spiritual and Social Offering*, 151.

150 Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1077.

151 Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1078, with reference to Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution*, 233.

152 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 122.

153 Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary," 1070.

154 Zaghvzdina, "Pussy Riot Indicted."

155 Valerie Sperling et al., "Constructing Global Feminism: Transnational Advocacy Networks and Russian Women's Activism," *Signs* 26/4 (2001), 1168, italics original; Melanie Tatur, "Why Is There No Women's Movement in Eastern Europe?," in *Democracy and Civil Society in Eastern Europe: Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies*, Harrogate, 1990, ed. P.G. Lewis (London: MacMillan, 1992).

156 Temkina and Zdravomyslova "Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society," 54.

157 Temkina and Zdravomyslova "Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society," 51-2 and 56-57.

ties and “pitched directly against [...] established (patriarchal) order.”¹⁵⁸ Pussy Riot does not advocate literal aggression, rather they seem to aim at “complicating an assumed relationship between women and passivity and feminism and pacifism”¹⁵⁹ associated with the gender asymmetry characteristic of political space in post-Soviet Russia.¹⁶⁰ This amounts to breaking a taboo. A telling statement from the trial came from a lawyer, Yelena Pavlova, representing several of the victims: “All the defendants talked about being feminists and said that [this] is allowed in the Russian Orthodox Church. This does not correspond with reality. Feminism is a mortal sin.”¹⁶¹ The invocation to the Mother of God to become a feminist seems here to have been judged indirectly in terms of blasphemy, as the call for feminism in the sacred space of the church is seen as a violation against the sacred body of the Mother of God herself: as public cries of blasphemy entered the courtroom during the trial, feminism became coterminous with blasphemy.

Conclusion

The cries of blasphemy in the courts, in the press, and among the public about the Pussy Riot case have so far successfully and effectively drowned the critical political voice and message in Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” video. On November 29, 2012 a Moscow court banned the video, declaring it extremist, along with three other videos of Pussy Riot.¹⁶² Soon after, Russian Internet providers were required to block the video after a three-day appeal period to avoid being “subject to criminal prosecution.”¹⁶³ The video is therefore officially sanctioned as offending *per se*, as the authorities deny access to it within Russia, spawning a new kind of iconoclasm in cyberspace against “art that offends.” Also, access to Pussy Riot’s Live Journal-blog and the support website www.freepussyriot.org has been denied. These are clear effects of political censorship. A Google-representative said that YouTube must receive a court order before it can make a decision on whether to remove the punk prayer video or other videos.¹⁶⁴ The criminalization of access to the videos on the internet is tantamount to iconoclasts demolishing an icon or a statue: the authorities would not commit such an act if the “Punk Prayer” images were not a challenge to power. It seems to be the case that “in a sense it is the iconoclasts themselves who believe the most strongly in the power of images. So strong was their belief that images have

158 Dawn Llewellyn and Marta Trzebiatowska, “Secular and Religious Feminisms: A Future of Disconnection?,” *Feminist Theology* 21/3 (2013): 254.

159 Halberstam, “Imagined Violence,” 263.

160 Salmenniemi, “Civic Activity – Feminist Activity?,” 748.

161 Ryan Cooper, “Pussy Riot Update – Prosecutors Call for Three-Year Sentence for Russian Punks, Declare That “Feminism Is a Mortal Sin”,” *Punk Music About.com*, August 8, 2012.

162 The anti-extremism legislation includes nazi-propaganda and Jehovah’s Witness’s material.

163 Reported by the Russian international news site RIA Norosti; United Press International, “Pussy Riot Video Banned.”

164 *The Australian* (no author), “Russian Court Issues Pussy Riot Ban,” 30 November, 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/russian-court-issues-pussy-riot-video-ban/story-e6frg-6so-1226527589707>.

power, that in order to establish control, politically and religiously, they needed to destroy what challenged them."¹⁶⁵

In the wake of the Pussy Riot case, the Duma started preparing a blasphemy law, which was passed in late 2013. The three-page law text calls for legal penalties to be toughened in cases of "offending religious feelings of citizens." The newly proposed Criminal Code (article 243.1) would punish "public offense and belittlement of worship services or other religious rites and ceremonies," as well as "public offense to the religious convictions and feelings of citizens."¹⁶⁶ Moreover, damage, destruction or desecration of "objects and items of religious veneration, places designated for the holding of worship services [...] constituting an integral part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples"¹⁶⁷ are included. Although nicknamed the "blasphemy law," 'Forum 18' notes, "the draft does not in fact contain the Russian term "blasphemy" (*koshchunstvo* or *bogokhulstvo*)."

Putin's attempt to turn Pussy Riot's protest into a religious question can be seen as a strategy aimed at protecting the politics of his administration from critique. It is also a way to consolidate and confirm conservative practices and virtues of Christian Orthodoxy, a way of claiming politically the sacred space of the Church. By placing their political protest in important Moscow cathedrals – mediated in the music video format and as part of a complex multimedia and art activist strategy – Pussy Riot is pointing to the politicized coalition between the clergy and the Putin administration. If sound is territory, Pussy Riot claims the space of the cathedral, not only for the minimal duration of a happening witnessed only by few, but for the duration of the video multiplied each time someone watches online. Haskins, in her study on the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, argues that state-sponsored monuments "are sites of memory that are capable of mobilizing public imagination beyond the ways envisioned by their sponsors and designers."¹⁶⁸ Pussy Riot's video performance is a reminder that the cathedral is more than an anchor for a specific hierotopy or ideology; it is a heterotopy, a dynamic site for historical and political negotiation (with a strong historical precedent), as they present their rival feminist interpretation of Orthodox identity precisely by staging their own courage to challenge the immanent violence of those authorities that remain in power. This challenge is acted out through Pussy Riot members' bodies in bright colored clothing, in the video dramatically opposed to the greyish uniforms of the church officials, whose presence is crucial as they come to embody the state-church coalition.

The imagined violent effects of the rioting actions in the video and the desire to control the available stream of images in the mass media, I suggest, have been the primary concerns of the Russian authorities. Unofficial, informal accusations of blasphemy, in addition to a vague notion of "religious sentiment," have in this respect func-

165 Plate, *Blasphemy*, 87.

166 "Offence to religious feelings of citizens" already exists in the Code of Administrative Offences (Article 5.26); see 'Forum 18' 2012; see also Brooke, "Russia Frees One Punk Rocker."

167 'Forum 18', "Russia: Pussy Riot, Blasphemy."

168 Haskins, "Russia's Postcommunist Past," 56n3.

tioned as rhetorical and emotional markers of persuasive power great enough to create public support for the prosecution while simultaneously avoiding the critique of the strengthened bond between state and church, which, one way or the other, inherently adds to the blurring of boundaries between profane and sacred domains.

The loud blasphemy cries uttered widely by the Patriarchate and in public over "Punk Prayer" arguably had an impact on the prosecution in court, turning the hooligan paragraph into something like an *ad hoc* or *de facto* anti-blasphemy paragraph. The trial even spawned further legal sanction possibilities against future punk art activism to offend patriarchs in power.

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