


Final Words, Final Shots: Kurosawa, Bortko and the Conclusion of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*

Saera Yoon  
UNIST

Robert O. Efrid  
Virginia Tech

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**Volume 21 Issue 4 (June 2019) Article 6****Saera Yoon, Robert O. Efirm,****"Final Words, Final Shots: Kurosawa, Bortko, and the Conclusion of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss4/6>>

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**Abstract:** In their article "Final Words, Final Shots: Kurosawa, Bortko, and the Conclusion of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*" Robert O. Efirm and Saera Yoon discuss film adaptations of Dostoevsky's novel. Both in his homeland and abroad, the major works of Fyodor Dostoevsky have largely made for disappointing film adaptations. This article examines the cultural diversity and aesthetic motivations underlying two very different adaptations of his novel *Idiot*, with particular attention to the concluding scenes. Both Akira Kurosawa and Vladimir Bortko follow the novelist's lead by hinting at some form of hope and future redemption amidst the tragedy but, for different reasons, they both fail to capture the rich ambiguity and creative ambivalence of Dostoevsky's final words. As the authors argue, the novelist's fluid dialogic aesthetic tends to disappear in visual adaptations, yet paradoxically thrives when released into new contexts less dependent on fidelity to his words. These two adaptations, despite their relative success, demonstrate the inherent difficulty of cinematizing the dynamics of Dostoevsky's art.

## Saera YOON and Robert EFIRD

### Final Words, Final Shots: Kurosawa, Bortko and the Conclusion of *Dostoevsky's Idiot*

With some notable exceptions (Kulidzhanov's 1970 *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, and Kaurismäki's 1983 version of the same novel), the major works of Fyodor Dostoevsky have made for remarkably disappointing film adaptations. So unique is the Russian novelist's approach to his art that the transition from the page to film of these incredibly complex and multifaceted literary creations seems to have confounded even the most skilled cinematic stylists and innovators, many of whose projected adaptations never even began shooting. One can speculate that Dostoevsky's polyphonic structures, spatiotemporal distortions, and otherworldly conversations simply do not translate well to stage or screen. As Viacheslav Ivanov explained, in describing Dostoevsky's "novel-tragedies," another medium "would not be suited to this purpose, since neither is it introspective enough, nor able to show all the strata of human self-determination" (6). And yet, Ivanov cannot but concede that Dostoevsky's artistic conventions are those of "the stage, and to which he adheres strictly" (14). A somewhat similar paradox persists Dostoevsky's influence vis-à-vis cinema, where a number of exceptional films, such as Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* or Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, may not be adaptations in a strict sense, but quite explicitly use the novelist's work as their primary source. For Akira Kurosawa this contradiction is particularly acute; the spectre of the Russian novelist looms large over nearly his entire oeuvre, informing both minor works and masterpieces (on the influence of Dostoevsky on Kurosawa, see Prince 135-39). However, *Idiot*, his sole adaptation of one of Dostoevsky's actual texts, is widely regarded as the worst film of his mature career.

In Dostoevsky's homeland, we see this paradox drawn out on a large scale. Good adaptations of the novels do occasionally appear, most notably perhaps Lev Kulidzhanov's compelling rendition of *Crime and Punishment*, but these are largely obscured by dull mediocrities, such as Ivan Pyrev's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and baffling failures, like Pyrev's strangely incomplete version of *Idiot*. Here again, however, the decisive influence of the writer is a critical factor in the realization of some of the world's greatest films. Dostoevsky pervades Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, and both filmmakers had extensive plans for full-scale adaptations (Eisenstein for *The Brothers Karamazov* and Tarkovsky for *Idiot*). The fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Russian nationalism has done much to improve the official standing of the writer and the novels have experienced renewed interest in the Russian film community, with serialized adaptations (and a fictionalized mini series based on Dostoevsky's life) standing as prestige pieces for Russian studios. But even these more contemporary, and ostensibly "faithful" adaptations lose much of the power dwelling within the novels, reducing the psychological and philosophical dynamics to melodramatic boilerplate and twisting major sections of the stories to better suit the contemporary viewer and, more importantly, the increasingly authoritarian regime.

Perhaps the most celebrated of Russian adaptations in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union has been Vladimir Bortko's 2003 version of *Idiot*, the novel that nearly a century before was the first of the writer's works to be adapted to the screen (by Peter Chardynin in 1910). Chronologically, *Idiot* is the second of Dostoevsky's four major novels and in many respects his most problematic. His biographer, Joseph Frank, described it as "the most disorganized of Dostoevsky's longer works and one of the most difficult to see in any unified perspective" (325). The author himself was well aware of the novel's considerable flaws, yet remained satisfied with the idea he was trying to express and gratified by readers who considered it his best work. And, indeed, the task of portraying a "positively beautiful man" surrounded by petty intrigues, predatory sexuality, and unabashed avarice is advanced by the author in a completely honest manner. Here, as Frank puts it, Dostoevsky "with an integrity that cannot be too highly praised," "portrays the moral extremism of his own eschatological ideal, incarnated by the Prince, as being equally incompatible with the normal demands of ordinary social life, and constituting just as much of a disruptive scandal as the appearance of Christ himself among the complacently respectable Pharisees" (341).

The plot, with a few major diversions, centers around the "idiot," Prince Myshkin, whose return to Russia after years of illness and convalescence in Switzerland immerses him in a series of unexpected, chaotic events. The central conflicts revolve around a love triangle involving the dominant male characters – Lev Myshkin and Parfyon Rogozhin – and the stunning but "fallen" Nastasya Filippovna. Further complicating the action is the Prince's love, apparently of a different nature, for the beautiful Aglaya Epanchina, whom he eventually forsakes in an attempt to save her rival. The novel's denouement features a grotesque harmony finally established between the rivals as they hold a vigil beside the murdered

Nastasya Filippovna. This incredibly charged scene marks the end of the main story, but an additional chapter follows it.

At approximately one third the length of the novel's other chapters, this "conclusion" (*zakliuchenie*) accounts for the events in the two months following Rogozhin's murder of Nastasya Filippovna and ends with the now catatonic Prince being visited in his Swiss asylum by Evgeny Pavlovich Radomsky and Lizaveta Prokofievna Epanchina, characters who provide a voice of reason amidst the chaos. This is a chapter unlike the rest, one that reveals an unmistakable rupture in time and space as well as narrative approach. But it is an anomaly not entirely unexpected. Robin Feuer Miller, in an exhaustive study of the novel's narrative technique, notes that in Part IV the "material of the novel has escaped the narrator's control" and that in these later chapters he "obsessively expresses his difficulties with the business of narration and does not let the reader forget his presence" (144). In the conclusion, however, the "narrator carefully distances both himself and the reader from the novel" (158). And, in fact, the narrator's attachment to the central character of Myshkin is broken almost completely here in favor of the heretofore secondary, though by no means insignificant, character of Radomsky, who at the midpoint of this short final chapter becomes the device through which the narrator imparts all concluding information.

What is particularly interesting in the case of *Idiot* is that its remarkably brief concluding chapter not only incorporates the style of an epilogue, where the narrator is at obvious pains to tie up his loose ends, but also a dramatic final scene in which Myshkin receives his visitors. Not surprisingly, the two major film adaptations have attempted significant revisions and re-workings of Dostoevsky's problematic conclusion. Bortko shortens the report on the fate of individual characters and imparts information solely through the mouth of Lizaveta Prokofievna – eliminating the character of Radomsky entirely from this scene. Kurosawa has a much different approach, offering a totally new ending without the elements of the epilogue. With the works each appearing more than a half century apart (the novel in 1869, Kurosawa's film in 1951, and Bortko's in 2003), the differences in these versions have much to say about the specific times and places in which they were composed, as well as the fluidity of Dostoevsky's art. In particular, an analysis of the differences in these endings grants us a somewhat clearer understanding of the inherent problems in adapting Dostoevsky's work.

### **The Reliance on Radomsky: Dostoevsky's *Idiot***

A number of critics have argued that at the end of the work, the focus shifts from Myshkin to Rogozhin, who begins a new life as a "great sinner" (Monas 89; Blank 79). Such a character, whose life charts a trajectory from grave error to eventual spiritual rejuvenation, is a central feature of the author's poetics, from *Crime and Punishment* to *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is possible, though the novel does not elaborate, to see Rogozhin's Siberian exile as a turning point, leading to a gradual transformation, not unlike that of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Yet, given that Rogozhin is reported as hearing out his sentence "silently, sternly, and 'pensively'" (Dostoevsky 612) and he does not have a companion like Sonya, it is questionable whether hopeful regeneration awaits him in Siberia. Moreover, Dostoevsky takes a very different path in the epilogue of *Idiot*. It is Radomsky, rather than Rogozhin or even Myshkin, who perhaps most warrants our attention in the final section of the novel.

As mentioned above, the novel's "conclusion" takes a peculiar form. On the surface, the third-person narrator continues to tell the story by providing information about the characters' lives following Nastasya's death and Myshkin's return to Switzerland. However, an interesting change occurs in the middle of the chapter as Radomsky, who until this point has remained a marginal figure, takes center stage as the primary source of information. In reporting on the protagonist's condition and the horrifying turn in Aglaya's life (she has eloped with a Polish "count" whose pretensions to nobility turn out to be just that), the narrator relies almost entirely upon Radomsky, specifically by means of his letters to Vera Lebedeva and his face-to-face meeting with the Epanchins in Europe. After informing the reader of the whereabouts of Rogozhin, Ganya, Ippolit, Lebedev, and other minor characters in the conventionally omniscient style, the narrative focuses on Radomsky, and it is from his vantage point that the reader learns of Myshkin's current state in a Swiss asylum. In fact, it would seem to be Radomsky's involvement that moves the setting to the asylum in the final pages of the novel.

But his significance is hardly limited to the role of a messenger or narrative agency. Like Myshkin, he too is presented as a "good man." Toward the end of the novel, Myshkin, still an embodiment of goodness but totally exhausted and drained, has lost his ability to elicit goodness from others. It is here that Radomsky's virtues begin to appear in a new light. This is not to say that he necessarily embodies the Christlike qualities of the Prince. He is far more susceptible to human weakness and, despite his

reasonable character, is occasionally cynical, even arrogant. But these shortcomings do little to undermine the fact that he is a genuinely good man and perhaps a sensible surrogate for Myshkin, whose insight into human nature leads him to befriend the character and even consult with him in many of the novel's most significant practical matters. When the Epanchins break off relations with the Prince following his choice of Nastasya over Aglaya, Radomsky not only refuses to shun his new friend but even tries to get to the bottom of his bizarre attachment to both women – in the process revealing a glimmer of the compassion that will come to the fore later. With Myshkin's full collapse into "idiocy" it is Radomsky who arranges for him to be sent back to Switzerland for medical treatment. Moreover, and with genuine sympathy, Radomsky periodically visits him at the clinic. It is not for nothing that the remaining Epanchin sisters, on their visit to Switzerland, praise Radomsky's "angelic care" (Dostoevsky 614).

But Radomsky is undeniably a man of the world and the apparently haphazard, but significant remarks on his romances put him at odds with Myshkin's virginity and pronounced lack of worldly experience. In contrast to the Prince's debilitating illness, Radomsky stands out as healthy in both body and mind. He is able to take an active part in the heated discussions on the issues of the day in Russian society, such as the role of the intelligentsia, and his critical views on radical ideology are generally in keeping with those of both Myshkin and Dostoevsky himself. His kindness and sensibility thus appear quite balanced relative to the novel's gallery of psychological deformation and pathological greed. Perhaps most importantly in the wake of Myshkin's catastrophic relationships with Aglaya and Nastasya Filippovna, the novel's conclusion finds Radomsky at the beginning of a healthy romantic relationship with Vera Lebedeva, a woman who embodies not only worldly virtue but even a spiritual ideal. Vera, whose name in Russian means faith, is the daughter of one of Dostoevsky's most outrageously sleazy schemers but, as Richard Peace observes, "shows traits of character which Myshkin himself prizes, and which seem lacking in the ideals of beauty to whom he is attracted" (98). Regarding her positive impact, Peace suggests that her presence in the conclusion, along with Radomsky and the young Kolya Ivolgin, is the "nearest approach to a positive ending which the novel offers us" (100). And her appearance in the conclusion is indeed telling. Vera is distraught by the fate of the Prince to the point that she actually becomes ill, and it seems to be upon her recovery (the narrator is careful not to go into details) that the correspondence with Radomsky commences and suggestions of their romantic connection begin to take shape.

And it is not only Vera whose growing connection to Radomsky encourages a ray of light in the novel's otherwise tragic conclusion. As mentioned above, Kolya Ivolgin also plays a significant role in this regard. In fact Kolya, who much like Vera is thrown into despair by the events involving the Prince, is decisive in eliciting Radomsky's involvement, tapping into his better nature as he solicits help for Myshkin in the wake of Nastasya's murder. But Kolya, in whom the author reveals themes of childhood he will develop more fully in *The Brothers Karamazov*, presents more of a hopeful future, with the narrator pointing out that "a good human being will perhaps come out of him" (Dostoevsky 612). For now, it is Radomsky who fills in the gap between Myshkin and Kolya and essentially paves the way for the maturation of Myshkin's young disciple. Thus, it is in the convergence of these characters in Radomsky that Dostoevsky's conclusion offers a ray of hope.

But the final lines of the story are hardly unambiguous, and though Mikhail Bakhtin, while championing the author's dialogicality throughout his works, may have lamented the "*conventionally literary, conventionally monologic*" (39) conclusions that seem to appear in most of the novels (particularly *Crime and Punishment*), that of *Idiot* can be seen as very much open. The chief problem is that Radomsky, much like Myshkin, seems to have failed to find a place in his homeland. Calling himself "a completely superfluous man in Russia" (Dostoevsky 613), Radomsky appears to be on the verge of permanently settling abroad. His future path is implicitly touched upon in the final paragraph of the novel, in which Lizaveta Prokofievna unleashes a fitful outburst against Europe: " 'Enough of these passions, it's time to serve reason. And all this, all these foreign lands, and all this Europe of yours, it's all one big fantasy, and all of us abroad are one big fantasy... remember my words, you'll see for yourself!' she concluded all but wrathfully, parting from Evgeny Pavlovich" (Dostoevsky 615).

At first glance this anti-European remark may seem an odd way to end a work dealing with the tragic failure of a Christ-like figure. However, given Dostoevsky's critical views on the west, expressed previously in the novel through Myshkin's anti-Catholic harangue at the Epanchin's party, it is hardly surprising or out of place. But it is especially fitting that the addressee of Lizaveta Prokofievna's speech is Radomsky. Given the place he occupies in the novel, Lizaveta Prokofievna's plea takes on a more symbolic significance. In pointing out Radomsky's misconception vis-à-vis Europe, she is implicitly urging him to return to Russia. A character known for her blunt, if not awkward honesty, she insists upon the superiority of Russia and accordingly tries to persuade Radomsky that his absence represents a state of delusion. His reaction (or lack thereof) is highly interesting. Instead of providing an answer (which

Radomsky would almost certainly do) the narrator chooses not to report his response; it is with the words quoted above that Dostoevsky concludes the novel. We never learn the extent to which Radomsky agrees to these anti-European sentiments and the omission leaves open a variety of interpretations and possibilities. The gap left by the missing reaction is much like a productive interstice, engaging a further dialogue with the reader and, aside from the obvious failure of Myshkin and fall of Aglaya, leaving this aspect of the novel very much open-ended. The implied reader is left to consider the possibility of a more positive future for Russia, should sober-minded people like Radomsky return to their homeland.

### **Ayako's Tears: Kurosawa's *Idiot***

For most scholars of Kurosawa, his troubled adaptation of *Idiot* (*Hakuchi*), at least in the desiccated version which survives, is a work best forgotten or viewed as "a necessary act of aesthetic catharsis" (Prince 142) and hardly representative of the master's indisputable genius. Indeed, given the filmmaker's obviously deep affinity with the Russian novelist, the masterful development of Dostoevskian themes and characters in films like *Red Beard* and *Stray Dog*, one must ask, as Prince does, why the work is "so amazingly bad"(139)? Surely if there is one filmmaker who *should* be able to not only successfully adapt, but even enhance one of Dostoevsky's great novels, it would be Kurosawa. To a certain extent, we may be lucky that the film, despite the apparent butchery on the part of the studio and the destruction of a "director's cut," was made at all. In just having the opportunity to make an adaptation of one of Dostoevsky's works, Kurosawa succeeded where other cinematic greats failed.

To be fair, Kurosawa's is not on the whole a bad film, though parts of it are indeed terrible, particularly in comparison with the filmmaker's numerous masterpieces. Andrew Durkin calls the film a "bold and complex experiment, an exploration of the boundary zone between literature and film, rather than a simple failure" (495). While we hold that this is indeed the case, some of the choices made from a narrative standpoint are simply baffling and perhaps better ascribed to studio meddling than the filmmaker's uneven, experimental vision. A scrolling, written narration, which first provides some background is inexplicably replaced by a voiceover not long into the film. This embarrassing distraction is magnified a short time later when the voiceover (never to return) gives way again to these intertitles. But even these glaring defects and others like them fail to ruin some of the film's more powerful episodes. One can recognize the hand of the master in the scene of Taeko Nasu's (Nastasya Filippovna) party, complete with the arrival of Akama's (Rogozhin) disheveled mob and the mental torture of the hapless Kayama (Ganya Ivolgin) as he watches his money perish in the fire. The interview between Akama and Kameda (Myshkin) in the former's house in the hours before the attempt on Kameda's life, their consideration of Taeko Nasu's portrait in a shop window, and certainly the vigil over her murdered body can be quite moving and unmistakably fluent transpositions of some of Dostoevsky's deepest concerns.

In making *Idiot*, Kurosawa moved the story to Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, and draws an unmistakable link to Russia with the constantly flying and drifting snow, as well as the vaguely European architecture. But the contemporary setting places the apocalyptic destruction of the Second World War and the near execution of the protagonist firmly in the background. This remarkable shift, creating a major difficulty in the transposition of nineteenth-century Russian culture to postwar Japan, marks a major (and perhaps unbridgeable) discrepancy between the two works. For Alexander Burry, Kurosawa "turns an apocalyptic novel into a post-apocalyptic film" and thereby transforms Dostoevsky's chaotic and overarching sense of impending disaster into "a frozen, static temporal and spatial representation of an exhausted postwar Japan" (172). While many scholars, like Prince, note correctly that this transformation between cultures never quite succeeds, Durkin finds such a failure to be very much in the spirit of the novel itself and speculates that the film itself may indeed be at pains to illustrate such a difficulty: "Virtually every feature of the film of *The Idiot* calls attention to the fact that transposition has taken place; viewers are constantly reminded of the alien, heterogeneous nature of the film's source, and the meaning of the film in large part arises out of the 'incompleteness' or 'inadequacy' of the translation" (495).

Kurosawa's conclusion, particularly for viewers familiar with the novel, would seem to be no exception to this. Given the filmmaker's emphasis on dramatic psychology and the exclusion of social issues contemporary to Dostoevsky, Kurosawa understandably eliminates characters like Ippolit and Radomsky, though the absence of the latter cannot but have a profound impact on the conclusion. When Radomsky is first mentioned in the novel he is introduced as a suitor to Aglaya, but this function is no more than nominal and his presence at this earlier stage is more palpable in the discussion with the so-called nihilists and through his consultations with Myshkin. Naturally, the internal logic of the film would not

permit Radomsky's later appearance for the sake of the ending and in his absence Kurosawa would seem to have been faced with two options: end the film with the highly charged vigil over the body of Taeko Nasu or create a new modification of Dostoevsky's conclusion. The filmmaker chose the latter, but his transformation is not without the few glimpses of hope Dostoevsky provides at the end of his tragic tale.

In the film the climactic catastrophe is followed by a sequence featuring the responses of four characters: Kayama (Ganya Ivolgin), Madame Ono (Lizaveta Prokofievna), Kaoru (Kolya Ivolgin), and Ayako (Aglaya). The scene begins with Mme Ono's return from a visit to the sick Kameda, having been accompanied by Kaoru and Kayama. Kayama taunts his younger brother for his distress over Kameda's condition (essentially the same as that of Myshkin in the novel) and once again calls him an "idiot." For this Kayama is chastised by Ayako with a stern, scolding glance. The evaluation of Mme Ono in another room a few moments later would seem to echo that of the filmmaker, that Kameda is a "fine person" and perhaps "too good for this world," a somewhat different tact than that taken by the mercurial Lizaveta Prokofievna in the novel but, it would seem, a fittingly close analogue to her forgiveness of Myshkin and tears in the final lines of Dostoevsky's work. The concluding sequence, however, takes place in another room of the Ono home where Ayako attempts to console the still distraught Kaoru. The move reaffirms the role of Kolya in the novel and his concern for the protagonist but the presence of Ayako, at least on the surface, would seem to be a major departure. With tears in her eyes, she speaks the final words of the film: "If we could only live our lives just loving people like he did instead of hating all the time... I must have really been crazy. I think I am the one that was an idiot" (Kurosawa 145).

Ayako's remorse is in stark contrast with the actions of Dostoevsky's Aglaya, whose tragic fall is nearly as disastrous as that of Nastasya Filippovna and perhaps, given the author's and the protagonist's virulent condemnation of Catholicism, intended to be no less horrific. The sincerity of Ayako's remorse, a far cry from the fate of Aglaya, is visually enhanced by the use in this final shot of a close-up, a device which, Prince notes, is rarely used by Kurosawa in any other film (141). Here, Ayako's tears are reflected in the falling snow seen through the windows behind her, a nearly ubiquitous presence in the film and suggestive of a larger, omnipresent sorrow surrounding the characters. But in so radically changing the character of Aglaya, Kurosawa may in fact be presenting a far more optimistic outlook than critics of the film often notice and, unexpectedly, a very different, if not opposite interpretation of the character. Far from dooming her to infamy, Kurosawa places the hopes for a harmonious future firmly on her shoulders. Ayako's repentance and the clarity of her speech call to mind the simple piety of Vera Lebedeva from the novel, as well as her near collapse following the death of Nastasya Filippovna. But her apparent mentorship of Kaoru, particularly in this final scene, also echoes the position of Radomsky. Essentially Kurosawa's script for hope and spiritual rejuvenation, however clouded it may be by the disastrous events leading up to the conclusion, is still in tune with the positions Dostoevsky puts forth in the final pages of the novel. But for this, the elimination of the characters Radomsky and Vera necessitate a somewhat radical transformation in one of the central characters. While one may argue that Kurosawa's Ayako perhaps shows more of a capacity for such a transformation than her literary counterpart, the change is still a rather jarring turnaround that erases the subtle ambiguity of the original. In the conclusion of *Hakuchi* it is perhaps not so much that Kurosawa mimics the novelistic conventions Dostoevsky may employ (at least according to Bakhtin) in the endings of his novels but, together with cinematic techniques like the close-up, devolves into the realm of Hollywood melodrama. (See image 1 on p. 10: Ayako's tears.)

And although this altered ending and the fusion of Radomsky and Vera into the character of Ayako is not an ill fit for Kurosawa's version of the story (it remains in line with the overarching spirit of the novel), Ayako's final words are awkwardly explicit and didactic in a way demonstrably foreign to both the novelist's technique and his outlook on the world. While in both the novel and adaptation a female character delivers the final words, it is only in the former that we seem to find a diegetic interlocutor. In Dostoevsky's novel, Radomsky's response is not reported but his presence is manifest as the text ends with his name. Indeed, given the concentration on the character, the reader is encouraged to anticipate his response. By contrast, Ayako's final words do not seem to be directed to Kaoru at all; her words of remorse are clearly meant to be taken as a soliloquy. Kaoru is apparently in the room in the final moments, but both the camera and Ayako ignore him in the final shot. In so doing, the subtle ambivalence and open-endedness that marks the ending of Dostoevsky's novel is absent in Kurosawa's final scene.

### Myshkin Returns: Bortko's *Idiot*

Dubbed "the most accurate *ekranizatsiia*" (filming) of the novel (Moskvina), Bortko's adaptation of *Idiot* rarely diverges from Dostoevsky's text. If anything, the modifications are restricted to medial changes such as dialogue rather than narration, expeditious flashbacks, and the addition of music. Fidelity to the novel was not limited to the script: the film closely recreated the manner of speaking and dress of the period, even using pre-revolutionary Cyrillic orthography for the title. And yet, for all of this, Bortko's adaptation departs in a number of crucial ways from Dostoevsky's work.

With the success of his 1988 adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's, "Heart of a Dog," Bortko had already established a considerable reputation as an interpreter of Russian literary classics and his subsequent films, which also include a rendition of Bulgakov's masterpiece, *Master and Margarita* (2005), and Gogol's, *Taras Bulba* (2009) are hardly without merit. In fact, Catherine Nepomnyashchy has observed in an insightful essay on the *Taras Bulba* film that Bortko displays an "almost pedantic accuracy, even slavishness with regard to the words of the literary text" in his adaptations (56). But the words, especially in an adaptation, never make the whole and the filmmaker has found a number of ways to manipulate the text to tell a somewhat different story. As Nepomnyashchy also notes, Bortko's adaptations, as well as other adaptations of Russian classical literature that have followed in his wake "stand at a fraught intersection between questions of 'faithfulness' and the use of classic literary texts, specifically through the intermediacy of cinema and TV, to remake the narrative of the national past to serve the desires and anxieties of the present" (56). Bortko's adaptation of *Idiot*, for all of its very real faithfulness to the letter of Dostoevsky's text, very much reshapes the author's narrative and does so in a way that seems almost wholly dedicated to serving the desires of the newly established regime under Vladimir Putin (in 2003).

This is nowhere more apparent than in Bortko's conclusion to his work which, at a glance, would seem to be an unmotivated but major departure from the original conclusion. The ending begins with the caption "One year later. Switzerland" (whereas the novel has two months' interval between the main action and the "conclusion"). Having conveyed these temporal and spatial coordinates, the ending features two characters: Lizaveta Prokofievna and Myshkin. In omitting Radomsky, Bortko, like Kurosawa, revises the combination of characters but here it is Lizaveta Prokofievna (played by the acclaimed actress Inna Churikova) whose travels motivate the move to Switzerland and, fully replacing Radomsky, becomes the focus of narrative interest and the medium of fabula information. As the sequence opens she is escorted by a Swiss doctor to see Myshkin, who does not recognize her owing to his condition. Sitting in front of him in the garden of the sanatorium, Lizaveta Prokofievna begins her long report on their mutual acquaintances, starting with the Ivolgins, Ippolit, and Rogozhin and extending to her own family. In effect, she covers the "epilogue" side of the "conclusion" as she ties up all the loose ends of the story; in the capacity of an actual reporter, Lizaveta Prokofievna replaces both Dostoevsky's third-person narrator and Radomsky.

But perhaps the most significant change to the text involves Lizaveta Prokofievna's final words, in which she urges Myshkin to get well and return to Russia: "Ah, Prince! *Recover and return to Russia...* Because all this, and all this abroad is fantasy. All this is just fantasy, and we all are merely fantasy abroad. As you see yourself " (emphasis added, *Idiot*). By adding a new phrase (italicized in the quote) in the imperative mood, Bortko's character tries to create a strong and direct impact on the addressee: Myshkin, of course, but also more broadly the implied audience. In essence, Lizaveta Prokofievna's words, filled with antagonism toward "abroad," restate Dostoevsky's commentary on Russia's relationship with Europe. Bortko makes only a slight textual alteration as he removes "Europe" from Dostoevsky's text altogether and inserts "abroad" in its stead. The use of the more abstract "abroad" for the specific "Europe" has two advantages. For Russia in the twenty-first century, when Bortko's adaptation was made, it is a more accurate reflection of the current geopolitical situation, in which Russia defines itself against the United States, not just Europe. Yet, Bortko preserves the binary opposition between "Russia" and "the other," creating a parallel between the contemporary reality of Putin's Russia and nationalist sentiments of Dostoevsky's day (Gerber 115–16).

This alteration, while it may appear minor at first glance, in fact conveys the filmmaker's own ideas about Russia and Russians. In his interview with the newspaper, *Zvezdy*, Bortko emphatically argues that Russians have to live in Russia, "our motherland," even if the Russian reality surrounding them is less than ideal. In conveying Russians' *right* relationship to Russia, Bortko's strategy quite explicitly erases the text's dialogic nature. And it is interesting to note here that both adaptations of *Idiot* seem to conclude with what is quite plainly the monologic, classically novelistic approach lamented by Bakhtin – and demonstrate somewhat paradoxically the mistake Bakhtin makes in regard to the dialogicality of the conclusion. Clearly, the film assumes much more of a didactic role with regard to its audience. While



Lizaveta Prokofievna expresses her animosity toward Europe, Dostoevsky ends the novel with neither support nor rejection of her opinion, thereby opening room for the reader's interpretation. By contrast, Bortko moves the camera from Lizaveta Prokofievna to Myshkin to highlight his faint, but rather lucid smile. If Dostoevsky's choice for the very last word of the entire novel is the open-ended address "Evgeny Pavlovich" (Radomsky's first name and patronymic), in Bortko's film the counterpart is Myshkin's answering smile. The sequence of shots, culminating in a tight close up of Myshkin's face, seems an unambiguous validation of Lizaveta's nationalistic rant, and an awkward transmission of the filmmaker's own endorsement. Furthermore, through the smile Bortko could be implying Myshkin's future recovery and a return to his homeland at Lizaveta Prokofievna's urging, something the novel seems to leave outside the realm of possibility. (See images 2 and 3 on p. 10-11, Myshkin's smile.)

This major departure from the original has not gone unnoticed by astute viewers and commentators. Though the nationalistic message amplified in this adaptation is not necessarily one with which Dostoevsky himself would disagree, artistically it seems an especially disappointing move. Gone completely is the dark, Dickensian humor found throughout Dostoevsky's text but more important is the sacrifice of the author's profound ambiguity in the service of jingoistic promotion. In a study of Bortko's adaptation of *Master and Margarita*, Jeffrey Brassard has written that the filmmaker and other Russian broadcasters have been "retrofitting Soviet culture to shape a Russian national identity" (153). Given the pull of Soviet authoritarianism palpable in contemporary Russian society, it would seem that the same holds true for Bortko's adaptation of pre-revolutionary culture. As Konstantin Klioutchkine describes it, Lizaveta Prokofievna's speech in this final scene, a concise distillation of this adaptation's primary message, "departs from Dostoevsky's original and moves to the idiom of the late Soviet middle class." Here Klioutchkine notes that the "evacuation of irony from Dostoevsky's text" creates a type of discourse that denies the novelist's characteristic ambiguity and complexity in favor of the clear, one-dimensional message of national sentiment. It is worth noting that Bortko's adaptation was commissioned by the government-controlled TV station "Russia" and the Russian Ministry of Culture. Tracing the development and financing of these projects, it is difficult to disagree with Nepomnyashchy (and numerous other observers such as Kaspe and Kruglova), that the "Russian state has become the primary sponsor of this revisionist 'historical realism'" (58). Indeed, the revisions to historical and classic literary texts in contemporary Russia is not unlike numerous cultural products of the Stalinist regime, in which figures from diverse periods of Russian history became avatars of contemporary Soviet values. Seen in this light, in the time of so-called "Soviet nostalgia," Bortko's allegedly faithful rendition of Dostoevsky's classic is in fact a reinterpretation catering to the spirit of the Putin era and the promotion of Soviet cultural heritage.

### Concluding Remarks

Clearly, simply repeating the words and themes, or even embracing the author's political or moral positions can hardly make for an artistically successful film adaptation of Dostoevsky's work. And the problems are particularly acute in dealing with so complex a scene as the conclusion to *Idiot*. Both Kurosawa and Bortko follow Dostoevsky's lead in conveying a ray of hope at the end of their films. But while the filmmakers are eager to deliver Dostoevsky's vision for future, and despite their considerable cinematic skills, they fail to capture the rich ambiguity and creative ambivalence that elicits the reader's active participation in the text. In their final shots, both Kurosawa and Bortko are clearly unable to cinematize the fluid dynamics of Dostoevsky's final words. But in this they are hardly alone and the apparent impossibility of adapting Dostoevsky's later novels, at least in the case of Kurosawa, remains enigmatic in the face of the overwhelmingly positive influence the writer has on great filmmakers. Perhaps the key lies in a rather general observation by the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, who finds in Dostoevsky "the spirit of Heraclitus," something always fluid and dynamic, always clashing and contradictory (108). Though this is hardly the basis for adaptation into a traditionally coherent cinematic narrative, Dostoevsky's aesthetic is yet supremely productive when a filmmaker, such as Kurosawa, Eisenstein, or Scorsese unleashes the potential into another, still living aesthetic context, without borrowing (and then necessarily altering) the structures of the hypotext. It would thus seem Dostoevsky's dialogic art and the organic nature of his individual works simply cannot survive the pressure of visual adaptation, no matter how skilled the filmmaker, yet paradoxically thrives when released into new contexts and enters into a dialogic relation with another artist. In this respect, Fredric Jameson's "law" proposing that an adaptation "must be utterly different from, utterly unfaithful to, its original" (218) to be of equal merit seems applicable in accounting for the disappointing aspects of these films.

On the other hand, while this analysis (out of necessity) assumes the vantage point of fidelity criticism, adaptation theory may allow for a different reading. In eliminating the ambiguity prevalent in the

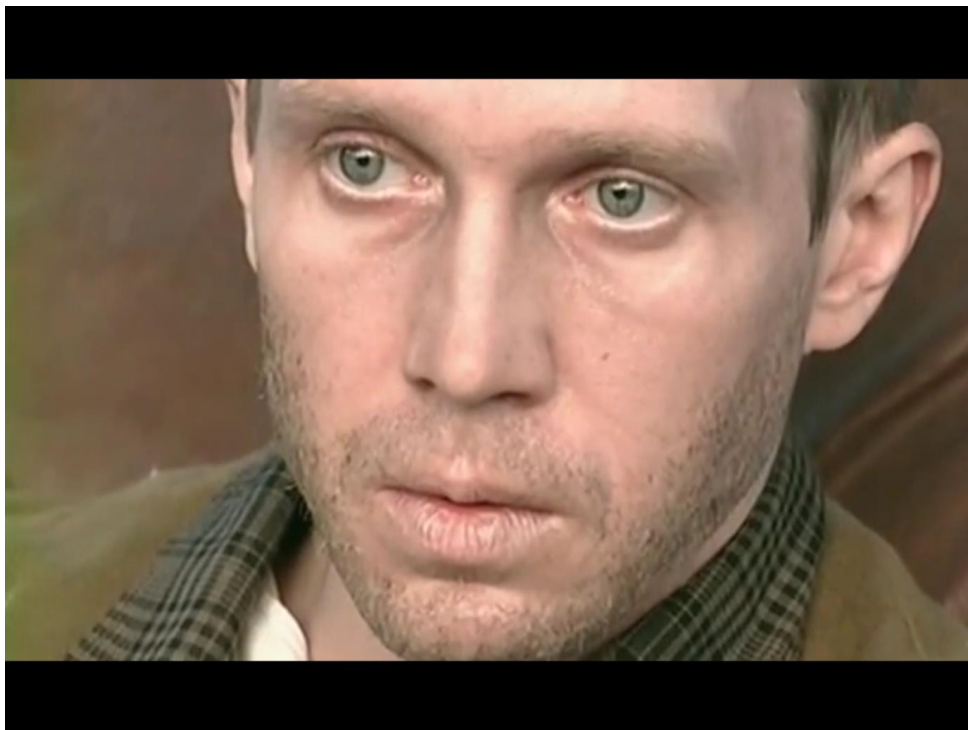
novel's conclusion, the two adaptations demonstrate that Kurosawa and Bortko prefer a clear message, ending their films with a distinctly monologic tone. In doing so, however, both film directors can be seen as establishing, perhaps unconsciously, a dialogue with the novelist on the nature of the protagonist's downfall and the vision for future. Unable or uninterested in transposing Dostoevsky's dialogue with the implied readers, Kurosawa and Bortko try to present their own interpretations, thereby offering a dialogic response to the novelist, but not necessarily the viewers. To put it differently, if Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel anticipates the response of the implied reader, Kurosawa and Bortko choose instead to engage in a dialogue with the implied author, by altering the novel's conclusion.

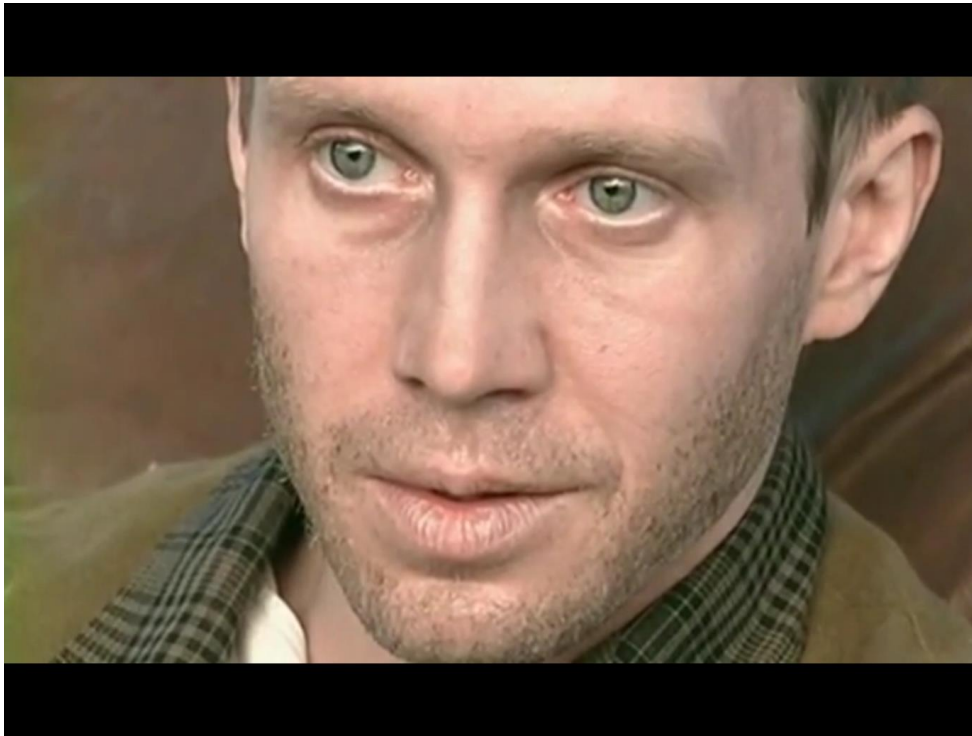
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Image 1: Ayako's tears in the final scene of Kurosawa's *Idiot*





Images 2 and 3: Myshkin's smile in the final scene of Bortko's *Idiot*. Note the change of Myshkin's facial expression as he hears Lizavata Prokofievna's.

**Authors profiles:** Saera Yoon teaches literature at Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology. Her research interests are Russian literature and film. Yoon's publications include "Intertextuality in Kurosawa's Film Adaptation of *The Idiot*," *CLCWeb* (2013) and "Revitalization or Deception: *Anna Karenina*'s Central Characters in Europe," *Russian Literature* (2016). Email: <[sayoon@unist.ac.kr](mailto:sayoon@unist.ac.kr)>

Robert Efird teaches Russian at Virginia Tech and is the author of "Isochrony and the Story/Discourse Distinction in Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* (2011), "Deleuze on Tarkovsky: The Crystal-Image of Time in *Steamroller and Violin*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* (2014), and a number of other articles on cinema and philosophy. Email: <[refird@vt.edu](mailto:refird@vt.edu)>