

Jest in Time: The Problems and Promises of the Holy Fool in Francesco, *giullare di Dio*, *Ordet*, and *Ikiru*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*, 1950), Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), and Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) through the theoretical lens of the religious figure of the holy fool. First, I assert that each film employs a foolish character in order to critique the contemporary culture, particularly resisting modern attempts to soften or ignore extreme elements of Christian teaching, such as sacrificial self-giving for others or the hope of bodily resurrection. Second, I argue that the content of a fool character affects the film's form, creating a subversive style which in turn aims to produce a "conversion" or change in the viewer, making the film itself an instantiation of holy folly. A typology of the holy fool within the Christian tradition, its major features and functions, is first discussed followed by detailed analyses of each film.

Keywords

holy fool, wise fool, folly, narrative, film stylistics, Roberto Rossellini, Akira Kurosawa, Carl Dreyer, Francesco *giullare di Dio*, *Ordet*, and *Ikiru*

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“If you remain at the surface, a thing may appear absurd; but if you pierce through to the

spiritual meaning, you will adore the divine wisdom.”
Erasmus, *The Sileni Alcibiades*¹

I. **Introduction**

Roberto Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*, 1950), Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952), and Carl Dreyer’s *Ordet* (1955) appeared within five years of each other. While there are obvious differences between the films—they are from three different global regions, portray three different historical periods, and have different narrative structures and visual styles—the films share significant points in common. First, each film employs problematic narrative and stylistic elements that challenge our normal, “easy” ways of consuming films. Next, there is a main character who is foolish, acting against accepted social conventions. Third, there is, to varying degrees, some reference to Jesus Christ. Finally, compared to many so-called “religious” films, these three films leave the viewer with a sense of having been given a special revelation and being challenged toward some kind of response, yet they avoid being preachy or appearing as propaganda in any way.

In this paper I suggest that the nexus of these four elements can be better understood through the religious figure of the holy fool. I argue two related points. First, I assert that each film employs a foolish character in order to critique the contemporary culture, particularly resisting modern attempts to soften or ignore the extreme elements of Christian teaching such as sacrificial self-giving for others or the hope of bodily resurrection. Second, I argue that the content of a fool character affects the film’s form, creating a subversive style which in turn

aims to produce a “conversion” or change in the viewer, making the film itself an instantiation of holy

folly. In these ways the films can be seen as extensions of the holy fool tradition and this constitutes both the problem and promise of the holy fool in film. There is the promise of enlightenment if one can “pierce through to the divine meaning” behind the veil of folly, both in the character and in the film itself. But the foolish character and the subversive style are also problematic because they may be misinterpreted as folly plain and simple, leaving the viewer unchanged.

First, I will briefly lay out a typology of the holy fool within the Christian tradition, discussing its major features and functions. The holy fool is not unique to Christianity but I use this tradition because of the explicit Christian references in the three films. At the same time I am not arguing that each film attempts to apply the typology of the Christian holy fool directly or totally. Rather, I suggest that the Christian fool type provides a clear and convenient guide for thinking of these characters as holy fools. This holy fool typology not only allows us to identify the characters in the films as holy fools but more importantly helps us see how the films themselves function as holy fools through their subversion of typical narrative and stylistic elements, confronting the viewer with the need for decision. Finally, I should note that I discuss these three films together because on one hand they share the common features mentioned above, but on the other hand they each manifest three distinct and complimentary subversive styles. This has the benefit of showing that the subversive style elicited by the holy fool is not monolithic but can take many forms and tends towards diversity.

II. The Christian holy fool: its features and functions

The Christian basis for the holy fool or “the fool for Christ’s sake” as it is often called, can initially be found in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the prophetic literature. Here the prophet, often at the command of God, engages in foolish, mad behavior as a sign of judgment on the disobedient Israelite people who think themselves wise. In such a situation, as Hosea says, the prophet becomes a fool, the spiritual person a madman (Hosea 9:7).

The New Testament carries over this prophetic notion of holy folly, of God-inspired foolish action in order to critique the standard perspectives of the contemporary society. This is expressed in many ways. First is the life of Jesus Christ, who speaks in cryptic parables, performs extreme actions such as clearing out the temple, and associates with the lowly and marginal within society. But the deeper source of folly in Jesus is identified in the doctrine of the Incarnation itself, particularly the idea of *kenosis* (self-emptying) elaborated by St. Paul in Philippians 2, which suggests the extreme humility of God becoming a human as well as the idea of hiddenness, covering up divinity with humanity. Also important is Jesus’ teaching which stressed extreme action (denying parents, forgiving enemies 490 times, etc.), hiding one’s religious actions (Matt. 5), and the need to become simple and childlike in order to be part of the Kingdom of God (John 3). This emphasis on humility and simplicity is also expressed in the *Magnificat* of Mary where she sings of God debasing the high and exalting the lowly (Luke 1), and in the untrained simplicity of the first Apostles whose teaching confounded the learned religious authorities (Acts 4).

It is St. Paul’s teaching on the wisdom of folly in I Corinthians 1–4 that the above elements are brought together and condensed into a dialectical thought that would support the future development of the Christian idea of holy folly. In response to the community at

Corinth that appears to have been promoting the important intellectual ideas of the times, Paul argues that the Christian message, particularly the crucifixion of God, stands in defiant antagonism against the wisdom of the period, the ultimate ground for viewing folly as a deeper form of wisdom.²

Out of such a background the tradition of folly for Christ's sake grew to become an important, if always somewhat marginal and eccentric element of Christianity. The prototype for the holy fool is Symeon of Emessa (6th c.) whose life was written by St. Leontius (7th c.).³ It tells the story of the desert ascetic Symeon who, after years in the wilderness, was called by God to return to civil life and there pretend folly as a means to mock the world and to save souls. He famously entered the city with a dead dog tied around his waist and would go on to perform antic pranks such as throwing nuts at women during the liturgy, or symbolic actions such as whipping pillars and telling them to move, prophesying an earthquake. Symeon would wander town, happily associate with outcasts in society, and slept with the dogs.

Based on Symeon's life Kallistos Ware helpfully identifies key features of the holy fool which can serve as a typology.⁴ These include above all a freedom that is not tied to worldly concerns and enables the fool to call into question social conventions, whether religious, political, or moral. (6–8) This freedom is manifested in the wandering of the fool who is not tied to any particular place and often dwells on the margins of society. (7) Nevertheless the fool is not a hermit but lives his or her life among others in everyday settings. (17) The fool often engages in extreme behavior which ranges from nakedness (7–8), symbolic prophetic actions (8), or a “maximalism” that takes the hard sayings of Jesus very literally (13) to a childish playfulness (15) or association with social outcasts (15), all culminating in an attitude of *apatheia*, a radical

emptying of the self that lacks attachment to any passions and results in “inner freedom, integration and integrity of both soul and body.” (16)

These various features of the holy fool serve three main functions. First is to keep the saint humble, preventing pride and identifying the self with the humble, self-emptying Christ. (21) Next, the fool plays folly in order to mock the world and expose its false wisdom: “The fool bears witness to the basic discrepancy between human and divine wisdom. ‘Mocking’ all forms of conventional morality based on rules, he affirms the cardinal worth of the person. As a little child, he points to the kingdom of heaven that is utterly different from every earthly kingdom.”

(18) Finally, the fool’s behavior not only condemns social conventions that pass as wisdom but is a method to save others “who cannot be reached in any other way.” (21)

This typology of the features and functions of the Christian holy fool provide a lens through which we can identify main characters in *Francesco*, *Ordet*, and *Ikiru* as holy fools and interpret the significance of the subversive narrative and stylistic elements of each film.⁵

III. Simply silly: Roberto Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio*⁶

Of the three films under consideration, Roberto Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (“Francis, God’s jester,” released in English as *The Flowers of St. Francis*) connects most explicitly with the Christian tradition of holy folly discussed above since within Western Christianity St. Francis is one of the most outstanding examples, performing extreme humility and poverty in an attempt at religious reform. In particular what attracted Rossellini to St. Francis was the saint’s playfulness: “In short, as the title indicates, my film wants to focus on the merrier aspect of the Franciscan experience, on the playfulness, the ‘perfect delight,’ the

freedom that the spirit finds in poverty and in an absolute detachment from material things.”⁷

“St. Francis called himself the jester of God, he wanted to be just very foolish, because through silliness you can find the truth.”⁸ Rossellini further connects to the tradition of the holy fool by introducing the film with an intertitle that quotes St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, a seminal text for the idea of holy folly in the Christian tradition: “God chose the foolish things of this world to humiliate the learned, the weak to humiliate the strong.”

Rossellini’s motivation for drawing on the tradition of holy folly embodied in St. Francis is to challenge his contemporary Post-war European context. “I believe that certain aspects of primitive Franciscanism could best satisfy the deepest aspirations and needs of a humanity that, enslaved by its greed and having totally forgotten the Povarello’s lesson, has also lost its joy of life.”⁹ Rossellini’s purpose echoes that of the holy fool, to challenge the social and moral status quo and in order to communicate St. Francis’ spirit of joyful humility his film will take on a “foolish”, subversive form.

One of the initial ways the film subverts typical viewer expectations is that, while supposedly about the life of a saint, it actually de-emphasizes the miraculous aspects of Francis and presents a realistic, even mundane portrait of the early Franciscan community. This particularly challenges what is usually expected of hagiographic films. We can easily apply André Bazin’s analysis of Augusto Geninas’ *Heaven Over the Marshes* (1949) to *Francesco*, that it is an “accursed film that is likely to upset both Christians and non-believers alike. In it, sainthood isn’t signified by anything extraordinary, either on the physical or the psychological level. Divine grace doesn’t manifest itself in nature as the product of a tangible causality; at most, it reveals itself through some ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural

terms.”¹⁰

But perhaps the greatest challenge to the viewer is that the film is not about St. Francis! The saint plays a surprisingly marginal role in the film while the focus is on other characters, particularly Brother Ginepro. But this was highly intentional on the part of Rossellini:

In *The Flowers of St. Francis*, I don't deal with either his birth or death, nor do I pretend to offer a complete revelation of the Franciscan message or of its spirit, or to tackle the extraordinarily awesome and complex personality of Francis.

Instead, I have wanted to show the effects of it on his followers, among whom, however, I have given particular emphasis to Brother Ginepro and Brother Giovanni, who display in an almost paradoxical way the sense of simplicity, innocence, and delight that emanate from Francis's own spirit.”¹¹

By portraying St. Francis only in the reflection of his followers' actions Rossellini can advance his stated purpose. One reason this de-centering of St. Francis may be an especially effective means to challenge the viewer to rediscover the humble joy of the saint is that it avoids what Paul Schrader criticizes the “conventional religious film” for, a style that encourages easy identification thereby fulfilling “the viewer's fantasy that spirituality can be achieved vicariously.”¹² St. Francis' marginalization in the film frustrates the viewer's inclination to identify and confronts the viewer with the challenge to decide about the message of St. Francis. Thus the film aims to bring about a change in the viewer just as St. Francis brought about a change in those who followed him.

A. Narrative

The simplicity and silliness Rossellini gleans out of the stories of St. Francis,

especially those from another collection, the stories of Brother Ginepro, creates the narrative structure of the film which is a loose collection of episodes marked by intertitles. The movie has no coherent, tightly plotted narrative because the Franciscan Brothers themselves have no coherent narrative. As André Bazin says, “[Rossellini’s] little brothers of Saint Francis seem to have no better way of glorifying God than to run races. ... The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning.”¹³

The episodic structure of the film allows easy division into segments. There are ten “flowers,” discreet episodes¹⁴ all clearly marked by an introductory inter-title that literally tells us what we are going to see. The only episode without an introductory intertitle is the first, which is introduced by a voice-over narrator and provides the only significant temporal marker. It tells us that the Franciscan Brothers are returning from Rome having just received permission from Pope Innocent III to preach. This frames the loose episodes of the film, for the beginning and end are arriving to and departing from the Franciscan settlement St. Mary of the Angels. The interim episodes which make up the rest of the film, then, are snapshots of the Franciscan order in its nascent stage of development. Focusing on this particular period in the life of St. Francis reinforces the theme of simplicity, innocence and joy because it depicts the freshness that often accompanies any movement in its early stages before structural organization may develop. It is worth listing the episodes in outline form along with the approximate time dedicated to each in the film:

- 1) Arriving at St. Mary of the Angels. 8 minutes
- 2) Ginepro returns to St. Mary’s naked. 3.5
- 3) Giovanni “the simpleton” joins the Brothers. 10

- 4) St. Clare comes to visit. 8.5
- 5) Ginepro cuts off a pig's foot. 7
- 6) St. Francis encounters a leper. 5
- 7) Ginepro cooks food for two weeks. 4
- 8) Ginepro preaches to Tyrant Nicolaio. 20
- 9) Francis and Leone discover true happiness. 5.5
- 10) The Brothers leave St. Mary of the Angels. 12

The first episode sets the tone for how Francis will be depicted in the film. As the Brothers enter and walk towards the camera, Rossellini lets Francis go past and he focuses on the Brothers *behind* him, thus immediately undermining our initial expectation: that the camera will focus on the “hero.” But he redirects us to Francis with a Brother who calls out, “But why does everyone follow you?” The rest of the film aims to answer this question by presenting *what kinds of people* follow St. Francis. Through this indirect presentation of St. Francis we will see the portrait of the saint which is inseparable from his impact on others. The film, then, is a portrait not only of individual piety but also of how true community can be formed and who is qualified to lead such a community, the very message needed in Post-war Europe.

After this introductory episode St. Francis is effectively pushed to the side until the last two episodes. In all, scenes focused on St. Francis amount to only about twenty-five minutes while Ginepro and Giovanni, the most foolish of all the brothers, take up almost fifty-five minutes. Watching the film, it is clear that Ginepro is the central character, a marvelous innocent who takes Francis' teaching quite literally, exhibiting the maximalism of the holy fool by twice

giving away his clothes to strangers, thus associating him with the holy fool's nakedness, and

engaging in other absurd behavior.

Looking at the time allocated to each episode, the eighth is the longest by far, accounting for almost one-fifth of the film. We can see the other episodes with Ginepro as preparation for this as we get our first view of the Franciscan message in the real world, although not through the eyes of Francis but from the perspective of the simplest Brother. The meeting between Ginepro and the tyrant Nicolaio, then, is the centerpiece of the film. It is a masterpiece with no dialogue, only the tyrant trying to come to terms with the stupid, innocent fearlessness of the man before him. Here especially the contrast of the non-actor monk with the stylized acting of Aldo Fabrizi comes together in perfect counterpoint (**Figs. 1 & 2**).



Figure 1



Figure 2

As Isabella Rossellini says, “In comparison to the non-actors you immediately see the intent of an actor.”¹⁵ Nicolaio represents all that the Franciscans are protesting against: strength, violence, control, and above all the *artificiality* that is taken on by humans as a means of accomplishing these. Self-seeking individuals are playing a part, just like Nicolaio, which is perfectly expressed by the acting of Fabrizi along with his comic armor, another layer of defense and

fabrication.

And at every point contrasting to this is the totally open, unassuming face of Ginepro. Nicolaio puts his head on Ginepro's shoulder, giving up as the foolish Franciscan spirit conquers the strong and learned, fulfilling the film's opening quote of St. Paul.

B. *Film stylistics*

The encounter between Ginepro and Nicolaio is a specific example of another way Rossellini tried to communicate the simplicity and joy of St. Francis, through the extensive use of non-professional actors. In fact, real Franciscan monks from the monastery at Maiori played all the Franciscan monk characters in the film.¹⁶ Even the character of Giovanni was a local beggar Rossellini had met. Rossellini's own comments about this man help convey the way real-life simplicity translated into on-screen effect.

He was a very gentle person, and so old that he didn't understand a thing. At the beginning, I explained to him, 'St. Francis says such and such to you and you reply such and such. All right?' 'Yes, signore.' So he went on a repeated all my instruction. I told him not to say anything but his own lines—he answered that he understood completely and then he went and did the same thing again. I decided it was useless to explain things so I sent him for a long walk while I got the scene ready, and I put him in it without saying a word to him. The scene came out of what he did.¹⁷

A similar simplicity is seen in the monks. Isabella Rossellini comments that many of them could not remember their lines and her father just had them count numbers since the dialogue was

dubbed later. And when the monks were offered money for their part in the film they requested

it all be spent on one big firework show for the local village.¹⁸ This simplicity translates into the characters we see on screen and creates an ambiguous mix of real authenticity with a naivety which feels strange because it departs from our normal expectations of film acting.

Finally, the simple episodic narrative and the simple acting is all held together by a simple visual style. There is a lack of any virtuoso or intrusive camera work in the film. The camera almost always stays at eye level; shots are mostly medium shots with some medium-long and medium-close shots. Extreme long shots are rarely used, particularly for images of the Brothers running (which occur at least eight times) (**Fig. 3**). Close-ups are very rare and are used for emphasis, especially in the tent scene with Nicolaio.



Figure 3

The editing is also very simple. There are a little over five hundred shots in the film and the average shot length is ten seconds.¹⁹ The quickest editing sequences are the scenes of confrontation. Overall the rhythm of the film is natural, in keeping with the simplicity of the monks, the average shot length just enough to let the viewer take in the scene but without lagging and being too austere.

Compared with traditional depictions of St. Francis in visual art, Rossellini does not show the popular miracles or historical events associated with St. Francis, such as those in the

famous fresco cycles in the chapels of San Francesco. Rather, Rossellini restricts himself to the time period only after the blessing of Innocent III but before the Brothers go out to preach. This is all in keeping with Rossellini's effort to be real and historical but also simple which is supported by the use of non-actors and an objective, simple, realistic style. Such an approach recalls Bazin's discussion of Geninas: "...his goal was to create a phenomenology of sainthood. Geninas *mise en scène* is a systematic refusal not only to treat sainthood as anything but a fact, an event occurring in the world, but also to consider it from any point of view other than the external one. He looks at sainthood from the outside, as the ambiguous manifestation of a spiritual reality that is absolutely impossible to prove."²⁰

This impossibility is what forces the viewer from a position of easy consumption of the film and identification with St. Francis to a need for decision, decision whether Francis really was a saint, if his message of joyful, humble, self-giving in imitation of Christ is true in contrast to the worldly powers of greed and violence. This confrontation is intensified through the subversive elements Rossellini employs such as the loose, rambling narrative, the lack of focus on the character of Francis, and the non-dramatic film style. The result is that we as viewers are left with the option of either rejecting it all as too confusing, absurd, and foolish, or to acknowledge the uncanny feeling that the truth for today is really in these silly tales. The problem then is how to act on it.

IV. **Ridiculously sublime: Carl Dreyer's *Ordet***

If Rossellini's aim was to communicate the Franciscan spirit of humility and joy and make it believable in the modern world, Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* has a similarly ambitious goal, to question the possibility of faith in the modern world, up to the point of believing in the literal resurrection of the dead.

The story centers on an intergenerational family, the Borgens. Morten is the patriarch who oversees the large farm. There are three sons, Mikkel, the eldest who has become an atheist, Johannes, a brilliant theology student who has gone mad and thinks he is Jesus, and Anders.

Mikkel is married to Inger, a lively figure that serves everyone and brings peace and joy. Mikkel and Inger have two children, Maren and young Inger, and Inger is heavily pregnant with a third. Inger dies during childbirth.

The film, based on the play by Kaj Munk, is best known for its dramatic ending which visually portrays the resurrection of dead Inger. This has also been one of the most problematic elements of the film. Are we really supposed to accept Inger's resurrection as authentic? Based on Dreyer's own comments, it seems that we should.²¹ For one thing, he removed even the loophole Kaj Munk allowed in his play, the doctor saying that the coroner must have misdiagnosed the death.²² But it is a comment in an unpublished manuscript that provides the clearest proof:

The aim of the film must be to induce in the audience a tacit acceptance of the author's idea, as expressed in the closing stages of the film, namely that a sufficiently strong faith confers on its possessor the power of performing miracles.

With this aim in mind the audience must be gradually prepared, beguiled, inveigled into a mood of religious mysticism. To make them receptive to the miracle

they must be led to that special sense of grief and melancholy which people experience at a funeral. ...

The audience must be made to forget that they are seeing a film, and must be persuaded (or, if you prefer, hypnotized) into thinking that they are witnessing a

divine intervention, so that they go away gripped and silent.²³

This quote is significant because in many ways it holds the key to the whole film and its style, an attempt to get us as viewers to identify with the characters and accept the miracle. By attempting this, the film challenges modern versions of faith. On one hand it challenges a simple faith in modern science that rules out the possibility of miracles, exemplified by the doctor in the film. But it also challenges modern forms of religious faith that explain away the most extreme elements of Christian belief, particularly miracles, exemplified in Morten Borgen and the new village pastor.

However, there is one figure that has true faith and it is the child, Maren. What does she have faith in? Her uncle Johannes. She accepts his statement that he can raise Inger from the dead. Since Maren's belief in Johannes is essential to perform the miracle, if Dreyer is to be successful in persuading us to accept the miracle of Inger's resurrection he must also get *us* to believe in Johannes, the other problematic element in the film.

Johannes is a polarizing figure. Many critics' negative reactions can be summarized by that of Tom Milne who describes Johannes as a "blot on the film—irritating, unconvincing, and given more dialogue than strictly necessary to establish himself and fulfill his role."²⁴

More positive evaluations, such as Carren Kaston's, see him as "one of the film's greatest achievements" because Dreyer simultaneously portrays him as "sublime and ridiculous."²⁵

Such statements suggest we may associate Johannes to the holy fool tradition, hiding wisdom in

unusual or even insane behavior that will scandalize many but be the source of insight and indeed life for others. Indeed, many of the features of the fool discussed earlier describe

Johannes: he exhibits a freedom to say what he wants and is excused even when it is inappropriate because he is “mad”; he prophecies and performs symbolic actions; he is within a social group but dwells on the margins; he wanders both outside on the dunes and within the house; he exhibits a maximalist belief in Jesus’ teaching, rejecting his family, believing in resurrection, and ultimately identifying himself with Christ. The function of Johannes, in keeping with the holy fool, is to challenge conventional social and religious beliefs and elicit a response from the people around him. Within the film there is the drama of how the others respond to the figure of Johannes, if they accept his words or write him off as a fool, but this same drama is then played out between the film and the viewer. Throughout the film Dreyer uses narrative and film techniques, some in a subversive way, to bring us into close subjective contact with Johannes and to challenge us to make a decision about him, which in turn shapes our response to the miracle.

A. Narrative

The narrative structure of *Ordet* is relatively straightforward. It is linear and restricted to a very short period of time which differs compared to the episodic narrative of *Francesco* and, as we will see below, the complex narrative of *Ikiru*. However, one significant way Dreyer subverts narrative in order to shape our relation to Johannes is by playing with genre.

The film begins as a kind of pastoral comedy, centering around the foibles of family and rural life, including the typical theme of getting lovers from opposite social groups to unite in a happy ending. P. Adams Sitney comments that “in the early parts of the film, the characters discuss the power of faith and the nature of miracles, but the viewer is encouraged to ignore these remarks. The reassuring markers of pastoral comedy guide the viewer to interpret the

theological issues as part of the texture of historical realism.”²⁶ At this point Johannes appears only as a marginal character, a colorful eccentric. It is only after the death of Inger that the question of faith and miracles becomes drastically real and Johannes becomes significant.

This shift in the film from light comedy to the literally deathly serious can help account for the tension felt throughout the film created by the characters of Inger and Johannes. Inger is easily the most appealing character in the film. In the first half Inger brings about harmony in the home and lives out her simple faith in her household chores. Her fluid movements, words, and expressions contrast markedly with Johannes who speaks with a grating monotone, has no facial expression, stands rigidly, and is socially unconnected from everybody. We simply like Inger and wish Johannes would go away.

Ray Carney interprets this contrast of Inger and Johannes very strongly and concludes that:

Dreyer includes Johannes in the film, and at certain moments makes him silly almost to the point of ridiculousness, precisely to indicate the consequences of a state of spirituality cut off from the practical, social forms of expression that Inger embodies. The pairing of Johannes with Inger indicates that visionary purity is the same thing as visionary impotence.²⁷

But such an approach ignores the real importance of Johannes. The clue to his significance, I would suggest, is in the throwaway comment by his brother Mikkel that what made Johannes go insane was reading too much Kierkegaard. What the comment may imply is Johannes' encounter

with Kierkegaard challenged how he viewed the Christianity he was studying.²⁸ One can imagine him reading Kierkegaard's essay "What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with

True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?” and coming across the following comment, posed ironically:

May I never be guilty of such vain lack of breeding—and may what could so easily happen never happen—namely, that the Word would take hold of me, precisely me, gain power over me so that I could not defend myself against it, so that it would go on pursuing me until I either acted according to it, renouncing the world, or at least admitted that I did not do it—a just punishment for anyone who lets himself deal with God’s Word in such an uncultured way.²⁹

What the figure of Johannes shows is somebody who has learned this lesson from Kierkegaard and has really tried to allow the Word, Jesus Christ, to totally take hold of him. If the film stopped halfway through, Johannes would certainly be a truly foolish and useless figure in the film. But the film doesn’t end there and instead the central death scene takes place and upends the film entirely and we begin to wonder if Johannes is as crazy as we thought.

B. *Film stylistics*

Earlier we quoted Dreyer that, “The aim of the film must be to induce in the audience a tacit acceptance of the author’s idea.... With this aim in mind the audience must be gradually prepared, beguiled, inveigled into a mood of religious mysticism.” For Dreyer it is an abstract film style which can accomplish this aim. “What is important is that the director share his own artistic and spiritual experiences with the audience, and abstraction gives him this possibility by allowing the director to replace objective reality with his own subjective perceptions.”³⁰ One of

the key ways Dreyer moves the viewer from an objective way of looking at the screen events to

a subjective participation is through distinctive camerawork and editing.

One of the most notable features of *Ordet* is its apparently static nature. No doubt a large part of this is the fact that the average shot length is a whopping 65 seconds, placing it way above the editing pace of typical films (we noted above *Francesco* was about 10 seconds per shot). This static feeling is compounded since many of the shots go beyond two minutes without a cut. There are twelve shots over three minutes long and five shots over five minutes. The longest shot is over seven minutes and coupled with the two preceding shots there is a span of twelve minutes with only two cuts.³¹ Such a lack of continuous, rapid editing is evidence of Dreyer's view of the camera's job in a sound film: "The real talking film must give the impression that a film photographer, equipped with camera and microphone, has sneaked unseen into one of the homes in the town just as some kind of a drama is taking place within the family. Hidden under his cloak of invisibility, he snaps up the most important scenes of the drama and disappears as silently as he came."³²

While the long shot length may give the impression of stasis, this is counterbalanced by another one of the unique features: the continuous camera movement within a long take, generating a feeling of the camera as *active* observer. The cinematographer of *Ordet*, Henning Bendtsen, says its best: "One of the most characteristic features of the filming of *Ordet* is perhaps the gliding camera that gets the actors to live *in* the drama because the camera is a kind of third person walking about among the actors."³³ We can extend this to say that this continuously moving camera has the effect of drawing us into the action as a third person, making us participants rather than mere observers.

This participative nature of the cinematography is reinforced by yet another subversive stylistic feature of the film, the absence of close-ups and shot-reverse editing. Ray Carney argues

this has the effect of emphasizing relationships among all the different actors rather than making us identify with one or two significant protagonists as is typical in Hollywood films.³⁴

But this

relationality goes beyond the characters in the film to include us. In an excellent analysis of the opening shots of the film, Carney identifies a critical moment. Johannes wanders out onto the sand dunes and is preaching his own Sermon on the Mount to nothing but hanging laundry. His father and brothers are looking for him. In one shot, Morten points to the right side of the film frame and we expect to get a point-of-view shot from his perspective. The next shot is of Johannes, but the camera goes on to reveal to us that this angle is not the point-of-view of Morten, who is off to the side, but a position unique to the camera alone (**Figs. 4, 5, & 6**).



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Carney comments on this surprising, unconventional edit, that “it is as if an ontological abyss had opened between the viewer and the characters, and, by implication, between characters’ personal perceptions (and expressions) and some other view of truth or reality decoupled from their views.”³⁵ This moment of disjuncture when we are introduced to Johannes is crucial for the

overall movement of the film which is to question the characters’ and our accepted notions of faith and religion, ultimately how literally we are willing to take Jesus Christ’s promise of the

resurrection of the body.

We mentioned earlier how the death of Inger marks a key point of transition in the film and Johannes takes on greater significance. Just preceding the death of Inger there is a unique camera sequence that marks this transition. It is a single shot of Johannes and the little girl Maren talking. According to Jonathan Rosenbaum the camera apparently moves around the two characters in a 360-degree orbit while never going behind them. But on closer inspection the camera only makes a 180-degree orbit. Such a misimpression is understandable because what happens is that as the camera moves around the characters the background seems to move faster, giving the impression that the camera has covered more than 180-degrees (**Figs. 7, 8, & 9**).



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

The effect of these two contrasting speeds is to create a feeling that Maren and Johannes are dwelling in a different time. We experience a miracle of two times existing in one space. While I believe his explanation about the shot's uniqueness is wrong, Jonathan Rosenbaum's interpretation of its significance is exactly right: "...we become so entranced by the actors and their delivery as well as by the camera's movement that in effect we become hypnotized, and are not even aware that we're watching a miracle.... So Dreyer essentially gulls us into accepting one kind of miracle as a way of preparing us to accept another kind somewhat later."³⁶ The

shot is also significant because it holds Maren and Johannes together in one frame, removing Johannes from the social isolation he has experienced throughout the film. Maren professes faith in Johannes exactly at the moment that we must begin to take him seriously.

Right after Inger's death Johannes tries to resurrect her, fails, and then faints to the ground. Later that night Johannes climbs out of the window of his room, writes a note, and leaves. The note is then shown on screen and it is a quotation from John 18:20: "You shall seek me, and shall not find me: and where I am, thither ye cannot come." Below the quotation is written, "John 18:20." What appears to be another delusion of Johannes quoting the words of Jesus actually turns out to be a sign of a change. P. Adams Sitney picks up on the significance of the note: "In giving the location of the text Dreyer introduces a subtle note: here, for the first time, Johannes makes reference to the evangelical authority rather than quoting the words of Christ in his own voice. By quoting the fourth Gospel, he recovers his own name, Johannes."³⁷ What seems to happen is the transformation of Johannes from an insane man who speaks as Christ but with no authority to one who speaks for Christ with authority. The next time we see Johannes, at the funeral, his eyes are clear, his voice and movements normal, and he no longer speaks in the first-person voice of Christ.

Two other technical elements are important for presenting Johannes to us, particularly his transition from madness to sanity. First, Dreyer put great care into making Johannes' voice just right. Dreyer comments "that almost all deranged people of that sort, people who believe they are Christ, and it is a general phenomenon among theological students, have a characteristic speech which differs a great deal from their normal accent. ... The accent is born of his derangement and belongs to its outer characteristics."³⁸ To accomplish this unique accent

Dreyer even took the actor who played Johannes, Preben Lerdorff Rye, to an asylum to talk to an insane man to get an idea for how to speak.³⁹ Indeed, Johannes' accent has been one of the most disorienting if not annoying things for viewers of the film. It is all the more shocking, then, when at the funeral Johannes appears speaking in a normal voice.

Second, particular attention was given to the use of lighting Johannes. An effort was made to keep him in the shadows while the other characters are well lit. This lighting dramatically changes in the final resurrection scene when the light around Johannes slowly increases until it gradually comes to the same level as the other characters.⁴⁰ Such lighting has the effect of emphasizing Johannes' madness and return to sanity, as Jean and Dale Drum note, but it also indicates Johannes' unique light penetrating the spiritual darkness of the other characters.

The change in lighting and dialogue makes it clear that Johannes was insane in the first half of the film and has regained his mind. But this makes it all the more surprising when at the end of the film Johannes *still* insists on the possibility of resurrecting Inger and in fact the sane Johannes is able to do what the insane "Jesus" could not. Johannes trades the folly of thinking he is Jesus for the folly of believing that as a sane, modern man he can still perform a miracle.

As viewers what makes Johannes such a difficult figure is that the film never gives us a conclusive explanation about what has happened to him, either what caused his delusion (apart from the comment about Kierkegaard) or what (apparently) cured it.⁴¹ Bazin's comment quoted above is equally applicable to Dreyer's film, that it "looks at sainthood from the outside, as the ambiguous manifestation of a spiritual reality that is absolutely impossible to prove." But Dreyer's stylistic approach differs from what we saw in Rossellini. The refined sets and

dialogue, the unique lighting, the long-takes mixed with a very mobile camera and an absence of point-of-view shots, all contribute to drawing us subjectively into the action and into relationship with Johannes, numbering us among the characters who must make a decision about the foolish Johannes and his miracle from our own limited perspective.⁴²

By emphasizing the centrality of Johannes I am suggesting a reading of the character that goes against Paul Schrader's. Schrader, who incidentally calls Johannes a "fool of God" although he reads Johannes as simply mad rather than a holy fool, argues Johannes is not the main character of the film. He argues that in *Ordet* "there is no exaggeration in lighting, camerawork, or acting" and this produces the "cold stylization" of the everyday, an essential first step in his theory of transcendental film style.⁴³ In contrast to this I have tried to show how these stylistic elements are exaggerated, albeit subtly at times, in order to bring us to a point of decision about Johannes. Schrader is even aware of this possibility when he notes, "...one might think that *Ordet* was using a roundabout version of transcendental style, that the characters of the film, like the viewers, had to gradually realize that John was the central figure. But after his miracle, John again becomes a minor character."⁴⁴ After the miracle Johannes may step back but what happens is we are shown the reactions of the others to his miracle. Interpreting Johannes as a holy fool helps explain the significance of showing the reactions since Kallistos Ware describes the fool as "a mirror, showing people their true face, making the implicit explicit, causing the unconscious to rise to the surface. He is a catalyzer: remaining himself detached, he releases reactions in others."⁴⁵

Johannes as holy-fool-catalyst challenges our normal viewing experience, which is usually controlled, coherent, and casual. We are faced with the question of what to make of Johannes and his miracle. Jonathan Rosenbaum's reflection on his first experience of the film

captures this puzzling tension:

Almost half a century later, it's easier for me to see that the film poses an irresolvable challenge to believers and unbelievers alike—and that what drove me nuts as a teenager is far from unconnected to what makes me consider *Ordet* one of the greatest of all films today. The experience of the film demands a certain struggle, regardless of one's beliefs, and the fact that it can't be easily processed or rationalized or filed away is surely connected to what keeps it alive and worrying....⁴⁶

In dealing with the issue of physical death and resurrection, *Ordet* raises one of humanity's central questions. By making us a part of the film via the film style, *Ordet* directly faces us and asks what it would take for us to believe Jesus' promise of bodily resurrection and have our deepest desires realized.

V. **Acting very foolishly: Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru***

While *Francesco* explored the possibility of recovering the Franciscan spirit of humility and joy for the modern world and *Ordet* the possibility of faith in the modern world, Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* questions the possibility of meaningful individual action in the modern world. Kurosawa has said that "there is nothing more dangerous than a worthless bureaucrat who has fallen prey to the trends of the times."⁴⁷ This danger is elaborated in *Ikiru* in two ways. First, such a worker is dangerous for a democracy, preventing real useful work from being done for the

common good. Second, such a condition is dangerous for the individual soul. Indeed, the film presents the two as related, that effective social action can only come from individual

initiative based on authentic action, not mindless adherence to the status quo. Kurosawa's film combats this threat by presenting its opposite: nothing is more dangerous for a worthless bureaucracy than somebody who challenges the trends of the times.

On one hand the film can be seen as a response to the political situation of Japan in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a period that had seen "the break up of the large business trusts, or *zaibatsu*, and reform of the civil service bureaucracy" during the Allied occupation.⁴⁸ Such contemporary political concerns are certainly in the background of the film and are a target of its criticisms, but they are only part of a larger concern that runs through all of Kurosawa's work, the nature of individuality.

Concerning this question of individual identity, within *Ikiru* two interrelated themes appear which Kurosawa had begun exploring in his earlier films, especially, according to David Desser, *Drunken Angel* (1948) and *Rashōmon* (1950). These themes are first the question, "What does it mean to be a hero in modern times, under ordinary circumstances?" and second "how to live in an existential world, a world rendered meaningless by the death of certainty, by the death, that is, of God."⁴⁹ So, *Ikiru*, while broaching the subject of modern bureaucratic culture, widens its scope to consider the broader questions of modern alienation and meaning.

The influence of *Drunken Angel* and *Rashōmon* is clear, but one film that should be added and can further support Desser's interpretation is *The Idiot* (1951), the film Kurosawa made immediately before *Ikiru*. A commercial and critical flop, Kurosawa's screen adaptation of Dostoyevsky's novel was over four and a half hours long before the studio hacked it to under

three hours (the director's cut never reached audiences). Donald Richie argues that

Kurosawa's loyalty to Dostoyevsky, his favorite author, actually ruined the film because it aimed to keep as closely to the novel as possible.⁵⁰ However, he goes on to suggest that *The Idiot* made *Ikiru* possible.⁵¹ Such an intuition is born out by Kurosawa's own comment that "Dostoyevsky's novels are, well, like subjecting the human spirit to a scientific experiment. The people are put into an extreme situation, a pure situation, and then he watches what happens to them. If I do say so myself I think that after making [*The Idiot*] my own powers increased considerably."⁵² But this idea of Dostoyevsky's novel as a "scientific experiment" is hardly dispassionate. As Kurosawa says, "There is certainly no other author who is so attractive to me, so—well, gentle.

... He has this power of compassion. ... There is something which is more than human, better than human about him. He seems terribly subjective, yet when you have finished the book you find that no more objective author exists."⁵³ We could say *Ikiru* is Kurosawa's successful transposition of *The Idiot*. The film attempts to portray a similar gentleness and create a subjective/objective feeling like that produced by Dostoyevky's novel.

The thematic focus of *Ikiru*, authentic individual action in a socially restrictive world, can also be traced back to Dostoyevsky. As Stephen Prince comments, discussing the influence of the Russian writer on Kurosawa, "Though he leaves out the Christianizing components of Dostoevsky's philosophy, Kurosawa defines the social imperative in identical terms. What is necessary for salvation is a new, more demanding, higher form of individualism."⁵⁴ This ethic is summarized in a quotation of Dostoyevsky: "Understand me: voluntary, fully conscious self- sacrifice, free of any outside constraint, of one's entire self for the benefit of all is, in my opinion, a mark of the highest development of individuality, of its highest power, its highest self-

mastery, the highest freedom of one's own will."⁵⁵ For Dostoyevsky this ideal was found in Jesus Christ and, while Prince is correct that Kurosawa does not have the same religious commitment as the Orthodox Dostoyevsky, Christ is also referenced in *Ikiru* (this will be discussed more below).

Kurosawa's strong interest in Dostoyevsky generally, and *The Idiot* in particular, suggests a connection with the tradition of the holy fool which arguable finds its greatest literary expression in Dostoyevsky.⁵⁶ Indeed, we see many of the features of the holy fool manifested in the main character Watanabe: his wandering around town; his association with those on the margins of society such as the hack writer, prostitutes, the entry-level worker Toyo, and especially the low-class townswomen; his unusual speech that ranges from muteness to babbling; his anti-social actions such as breeching bureaucratic decorum or rejecting his family; and finally the ways he is always misunderstood by those around him. However, the disclosure of Watanabe as a holy fool develops in two stages, roughly corresponding to the two halves of the film, moving from subjective to objective presentation. First we see the creation of the holy fool Watanabe who must realize the folly of wasting his life in bureaucratic inaction, a realization that results in a conversion to wisdom and self-emptying action for others. In the second half we see how the other characters respond to Watanabe, judging his new "wise" actions as folly. The film, then, enacts the holy fool's questioning of reality and illusion. What is authentic vision, or understanding, which can produce authentic action? How do we create or fall prey to the illusions that blind us?

A. Narrative

This thematic concern with reality and illusion is foregrounded through the primary subversive feature of the film, the unique narrative arrangement presented through flashbacks

and multiple points of view. This tension is represented in two of the film's most striking images,

static photos, which introduce the first and second halves of the film. The film opens with an x-ray image of a stomach with a partially developed tumor (**Fig. 10**). The voice over, an omniscient narrator, tells us it is the stomach of Watanabe. This suggests a comparison between the film we are about to see and the x-ray as tool to see inside a person. What is in Watanabe? Just this tumor? Anything more? The first half of the film will largely give us a subjective, "x-ray" presentation of Watanabe as he comes to grips with his life in light of his death sentence.⁵⁷



Figure 10



Figure 11

In contrast to this first image, a little less than two-thirds through the film another static image is shown, a photograph of Watanabe with the same omniscient narrator's voiceover telling us that Watanabe has died (**Fig. 11**). The photo introduces Watanabe's wake, which makes up the rest of the film. Here Watanabe's coworkers try to understand who the figure in this picture really was. They will try to get behind the external picture to the internal Watanabe which we have been privileged to see before them. Through these competing narrative points of view,

the unseen narrator, Watanabe's perspective, and the limited perspectives of Watanabe's coworkers and family, we as viewers participate in multiple levels of irony that will ultimately reflect back to us the question about our own vision: do we see Watanabe as foolish or wise?

B. *Film stylistics*

The first six minutes of the film show the reified office setting that has brought about Watanabe's spiritual decline. While introducing us to office life we are shown extensive shots of Watanabe in medium close-ups all while the narrator is explaining Watanabe's condition. The combination of voice-over narration and the relatively static camera work present us with a very objective picture of Watanabe and give us more information than he even knows about himself.

After this opening sequence the narrative becomes much more subjective, drawing us closer to Watanabe (the voice-over narrator is gone). Now at the doctor's office, he is about to become equal with us in the knowledge of his medical condition. Our identification with Watanabe is created first by how he hears about his cancer. While in the waiting room one of the typical gadflies that takes pleasure in reporting other people's problems points out to Watanabe a patient that has stomach cancer, all the while unaware of Watanabe's situation. In a single, long- take shot the man describes all the symptoms to Watanabe. Within the shot Watanabe, progressively realizing that his condition is being diagnosed, gradually moves closer and closer to the camera, his face filling with fear (**Figs. 12 & 13**). Our identification with Watanabe is

intensified further when he goes in to see the doctor, now aware with us of his condition, and the doctor lies to Watanabe.



Figure 12



Figure 13

Unusual sound and camerawork further increase our connection with Watanabe. First is the scene after he learns of his cancer. He walks down the street alone and there is no soundtrack, just silence, as if we are listening to the numbness of Watanabe's mind in shock. Or we could say that our hearing becomes Watanabe's hearing. Suddenly the camera pulls back to reveal cars and trucks and the sound returns in a blare of traffic. Immediately after this daytime shot there is a night shot, which appears to be a first-person point of view shot walking towards a house (**Fig. 14**). We assume based on the previous image it is Watanabe's perspective, but we hear a woman's voice, and then a man's and it soon becomes evident it is Watanabe's son Mitsuo and daughter-in-law Kazue who are returning to the home they share with Watanabe (**Fig. 15**).



Figure 14



Figure 15

They are discussing the possibility of using Watanabe's pension and savings to purchase a new house for themselves. This unusual shot helps us empathize further with Watanabe since we are allowed to hear the calloused conversation of the children and when they turn on the light and see Watanabe sitting on the floor, dumb with fear, we know the truth of his silence while his kids misinterpret it as simply odd behavior. Desperate to connect with his son but somehow not able to say anything, we feel especially close to Watanabe since we share the knowledge of his burden.

Five days have gone by and his family finds out that Watanabe has not gone to work. The office, in turn, finds out that his family has no idea where he has been. This leads to progressive speculation about Watanabe's actions, actions which we again are made privy to as we are shown Watanabe at night in a hole-in-the-wall bar where he is finally able to share his condition

with a hack writer. Watanabe declares, "I'm such a fool," realizing that he has lived as a mindless drone in a banal office and produced nothing of significance. This acknowledgment of folly is the first of four stages of folly in *Ikiru*.

Terrified at such a realization, Watanabe sets out on a search for wisdom, for how to live. Watanabe entrusts himself to the writer who, in good existentialist fashion, admires Watanabe's will to live in the face of the absurd. It turns out the writer's inspired answer to Watanabe's question is simply a night in Vanity Fair, wandering the pleasure districts of modern Tokyo. It is in one of the hostess bars that the writer compares Watanabe to Christ. He says to the hostess, "*Ecce homo*. Behold this man. This man bears a cross called cancer. He's Christ. If you were diagnosed with cancer you'd die on the spot. But not this fellow. That's the moment he started living." The comment at this point is ironic, as a drunk Watanabe lifts his head from the bar.

However, as the film progresses the statement will become prophetic as Watanabe is led to a point of "voluntary, fully conscious self-sacrifice" on behalf of others. But at this point Watanabe only discovers that a life of dissipation is also folly.

Coming home in the morning from his night of disillusionment, Watanabe meets Toyo, a young worker from his office. Throughout the film Kurosawa presents Toyo as a child, energetic, joking, and innocent. Attracted by her lively vigor Watanabe takes her to cafes and restaurants, falling prey to the folly of trying "to live through another person."⁵⁸ This relationship produces further misunderstandings between Watanabe and his children who think he has taken a mistress as well as co-workers who speculate on Watanabe's absence. All conclude, according to the narrator, that "Watanabe was acting very foolishly."

Watanabe is disabused of his folly of trying to live vicariously through another person

when he begs Toyo, “Why are you so alive?” expecting some insight. All she can say is, “I just work and eat.” Toyo tells Watanabe he just has to find something to do and shows him the cheap wind-up toy rabbit she makes at her new job. She childishly admits that making them she feels

connected with all the children in Japan. The rabbit is an epiphany and Watanabe realizes it may not be too late to really live, to do something meaningful, if only he can “find the will.”

Next we see Watanabe a man reborn, at the office early and going through papers. He shows his coworkers the petition from low-class townswomen to fix a cesspool and build a children’s park. At first his colleagues resist but suddenly Watanabe finds a voice that has been silent, faulty, or interrupted throughout the previous half of the film. Thus emboldened to action on behalf of others, Watanabe’s transformation from foolish inaction is complete and we have gotten to share in it from the inside.

At this point the film stops cold with the return of the narrator telling us five months have passed and Watanabe is dead. As Peter Cowie notes, “...this cuts the ground from beneath the feet of the audience in a Brechtian manner; instead of identifying with Watanabe, they must view him in an objective light, which results in admiration rather than regret.”⁵⁹ As we noted above, Kurosawa used many film techniques in order to give us a closer, more subjective experience of Watanabe as he progressed from folly to wisdom. Cowie is right that this change in narration forces distance and changes the way we relate to Watanabe, but the change also serves to shift our focus from Watanabe to *how others perceive Watanabe*, “describing the efforts of his family and co-workers to understand his final, strange behavior....”⁶⁰ Here again Kurosawa gives us the ironic perspective. We know that Watanabe was not only aware of his cancer but that it was the motivation for his “foolish” behavior,

searching for some meaning. Watanabe's coworkers and family do not know this; they are only aware that he died of cancer. As Donald Richie comments, "In *Ikiru* it is important that the second half becomes posthumous because much of the irony of the film results from a (wrong) assessment of Watanabe's actions made by others

after his death. Or, to put it another way, we have seen what is real—Watanabe and his reactions to his approaching death. Now, in the second half, we see illusion—the reactions of others, their excuses, their accidental stumblings on the truth, their final rejection of both the truth and of Watanabe."⁶¹

In the second half of the film the rumors and speculations that Watanabe was acting foolishly continue, indeed they become more significant because whereas before Watanabe's actions were just an individual running around late at night or supposedly taking on a mistress, the action under debate now is the tenacity Watanabe showed in building the children's park. Based on the beginning of the film such an action resists the bureaucratic behemoth that accepts anything *but* purposeful action. Watanabe's foolishness, rather than an object for water cooler gossip and amusement like the other forms of folly he passed through, becomes a threat to the established order.

The subjective first half of the film contrasts with the objective second half in many ways. First is the difference in setting and time. In the first half a large amount of time is covered. In the second half, about fifty minutes in length, it is almost all "real time" at the funeral. Likewise, the first half ranges over numerous locations, from Watanabe's house to night clubs and bars to cafes and ice skating rinks, while the second half is almost exclusively within one room. Such a controlled time and place creates more of a "fly on the wall" feeling of objectivity, like the events are unfolding before us rather than being selectively edited. The

surprise, then, is that the editing actually increases, shortening the length of each shot which in turn increases the pace of the second half of the film. Not only does this faster editing create a

counter balance to the more dynamic images and locations in the first half of the film, but it is also perfect to present the back-and-forth debate between coworkers about Watanabe's life.

The debate starts when the deputy mayor, asked by reporters whether Watanabe was responsible for building the park, pontificates about how people do not understand the way bureaucracy works and that individual action is harmful. However, his statement is completely undermined by the townswomen who interrupt the wake in order to pay tribute to Watanabe.

After the deputy mayor leaves Watanabe's subordinate office staff continue the debate: was Watanabe really responsible for the park? Furthermore, what led to his drastic change of behavior, taking individual initiative? These are crucial questions that, depending on the answer, have significant consequences. As Stephen Prince notes, "Watanabe's present actions are a source of discomfort and disruption, threatening [the workers] regimented identities.... To their sensibilities, Watanabe's is a kind of reified behavior: it looms only as a threat, and its critique of the erosion of freedom and the loss of responsibility for human society in the modern world must be defused, for it could dynamite the established order. Thus, explanations are offered for the clerk's actions: eccentricity, glory-seeking, the influence of a mistress."⁶² In short, his actions are viewed as folly. However, in the series of flashbacks related from multiple characters' viewpoints we see just what kind of folly this was: the discovery of how to really live, finding the self in service to others. Here we may recall the hack writer's declaration, "*Ecce homo*" and see it coming to completion as Watanabe, like Christ, gives

himself in an offering to the marginalized townspeople in, to quote Dostoevsky again, “voluntary, fully conscious self- sacrifice, free of any outside constraint, of one’s entire self for the benefit of all.” This kind of living-through-dying is powerfully represented in the final flashbacks of the film.

In response to the comments that it was other departments that built the park, workers recall Watanabe’s quiet, patient, persistence that provoked others to act. In response to the claim that the deputy mayor brought the project to completion, we see Watanabe gently defying the mayor’s actual recommendation to drop the project. When somebody suggests the backers for a restaurant development pushed through the project we learn the truth that the restaurant didn’t want the park and Watanabe actually defied gangster thugs. In all of these situations Watanabe is shown hunched over, a shell of a man, but is revealed in close-up a man determined, aglow with a light of life.

When the debate turns to whether or not Watanabe knew he had cancer and if this could have motivated his change, one worker remembers, when asking Watanabe why he was not angry about the stonewalling from other departments, that Watanabe responded, “I can’t afford to hate people. I haven’t got that kind of time.” Another remembers Watanabe stopping and admiring a sunset: “How beautiful. How truly beautiful. In the last thirty years I’ve all but forgotten about sunsets. But I haven’t got time for this now.” Finally, a policeman who had seen Watanabe the night he died arrives. He had noticed Watanabe on one of the swings at the park and admits that at first he thought Watanabe was a drunk but then he heard him singing “Life is Brief” again. The policeman admits, “He seemed to be so perfectly happy” that he just left Watanabe alone. Indeed, this final rendition of the song is more moving than the first, for Watanabe’s despair has turned to joy and perfect peace in satisfaction with having created

something that is useful to others.

This final revelation that Watanabe knew he had cancer and gave himself up to bold action on behalf of others draws tears from the drunk coworkers who commit themselves to following Watanabe's glorious action. However, the next day at the office shows nothing has changed. "Watanabe's unprecedented activity and advocacy over the last months of life are a legacy lost on official society."⁶³ Thus Watanabe's action is finally presented as a kind of Quixotic folly.

I would like to return to what Kurosawa said about Dostoyevsky: "He has this power of compassion. ... There is something which is more than human, better than human about him. He seems terribly subjective, yet when you have finished the book you find that no more objective author exists."⁶⁴ This admiration may have inhibited Kurosawa when he made *The Idiot*, simply from reverential pressure, but in *Ikiru* the sentiment is perfectly incarnated. By the end of the film Watanabe has become like one of Dostoyevsky's gentle fool characters, such as Prince Myshkin, whose folly consists precisely in its guileless gentleness and common concern for other humans, a weakness that paradoxically overcomes the strength of those in power. Yet importantly Kurosawa, like Dostoyevsky, is able to prevent an empty empathy or banal identification with his character. We have seen how Kurosawa produced this effect through his creative use of narrative and point of view, giving us the subjective association with Watanabe in the first half and the objective distance of the funeral in the second half. And such subversive filmic construction has a practical point. As Stephen Prince suggests, "The formal experimentation of *Ikiru* has one central purpose: to sharpen the film's focus by controlling and limiting the audience's emotional response."⁶⁵ By distancing us from Watanabe in the film's second half and letting us see him through the memories of the other

characters we take a step back and reflect not just on his action *but on their reactions to his actions*. We see Watanabe's conversion from true folly to wisdom and then the folly of his coworkers as they discover

Watanabe's conversion. They come to accept his transformation, admire it, but then deny it in action, some with ease, others with difficulty. Hence the film ends with the shot of Morita, Watanabe's most understanding colleague, who just finds it too difficult to resist the bureaucratic machine. Overlooking the playground Watanabe built and died on, he becomes a shadow against the sunset light as he walks off screen, becoming a faceless "anybody" which reflects back at us **(Fig. 16)**. It is as if the film says, "You have just witnessed in Watanabe what it takes to produce significant action that resists the status quo. Look at how difficult it is. Even when it stares people in the face they will not change. So, what will *you* do now?" A positive evaluation of Watanabe's self-sacrifice as true wisdom does not mean that everybody who follows such an example will be a holy fool, but it does mean they must be willing, indeed ready to be called foolish and to be misunderstood.



Figure 16

VI. Conclusion

In our study of *Francesco*, *Ordet*, and *Ikiru* we have seen three different ways the holy

fool tradition was taken up as a means to respond to some contemporary challenges. In *Francesco* the holy folly of St. Francis and his Brothers, especially Ginepro, suggested a moral compass for Post-war Europe which, according to Rossellini, was becoming dominated by greed and a loss of joy. In *Ordet* the holy fool Johannes raised the question of the condition of faith in the modern world and its possible recovery. In *Ikiru* the wise folly discovered and enacted by Watanabe showed how heroic, meaningful action can still be performed in a reified, bureaucratic society. Each film raises resistance to complacent attempts to soften the extreme elements of Christian teaching such as sacrificial self-giving for others and the hope of bodily resurrection.

By critiquing the contemporary culture in these ways the films extend the Christian tradition of holy folly. As the Orthodox theologian Cristos Yannaras says, “The fools come to remind us that the Gospel message is ‘foolishness,’ and that salvation and sanctity cannot be reconciled with the satisfaction that comes from society’s respect and objective recognition. They present themselves during periods of ‘secularization’ among Christians, when the Christian identity seems to depend on conventional standards and ideas of a world which measures the true life of man with the yardstick of social decorum and deontology.”⁶⁶

I have also argued that these films not only portray a type of holy fool but that the film itself becomes a kind of holy fool through subversive narrative and formal elements. The form reflects the content. This is what we saw when we explored how the films challenge our normal ways of watching. The naïve episodic narrative of *Francesco* that largely ignores the “hero” Francis, the overturning of genre expectations in *Ordet* that makes Johannes a central character, and the complex narrative presented through multiple points of view in *Ikiru* are all means to make us face the hard aspects of the Christian message and question our current

perspective. But each of the films confronts us in a different way. The narration and film style of *Francesco* gives us an objective perspective, looking at everything from the outside. *Ordet* uses the film style to

draw us in and creates a relatively subjective experience of the film events. Finally, *Ikiru* combines both, giving us the subjective experience of Watanabe's conversion from folly to wisdom in the first half of the film and then placing us outside to objectively observe how the people around him understand and respond to his actions. But all three leave us with a sense of being called to decide.

What the holy fool ultimately signifies in these three films and what unites them is a concern with simplicity: a simple life, a simple faith, and a simple action. It is hardly surprising, then, that in each film a child or childlikeness is foregrounded. The childish play of the Franciscans, the child Maren who believes in Johannes, and Watanabe's epiphany through the child's toy rabbit and his decision to build a playground. In the face of the dramatic problems of the Post-war period but also more broadly in the face of the problems posed by the modern world, its increasing political complexity, capitalistic economic proliferation, reductionistic scientific explanation, and technological control, these films contest what passes for "wisdom" and beckon us to what appears foolish: to be disabused of our selfish illusions and rediscover both a child-like wonder in all that is and the wonderful possibility of the community it can become.

**No
tes**

¹ Quoted in Florence W. Weinberg, *The Wine and the Will: Rabelais's Bacchic Christianity*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 21.

² L. L. Welborn's study of this section of I Corinthians suggests Paul was drawing associations with the mime

plays of the Greco-Roman world, one of the only public places where the necessary but shameful practice of crucifixion could find psychological release in Rome. See *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition*, (London: T & T Clark, 2005).

³ See Derek Kreuger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁴ "The Holy Fool as Prophet and Apostle," *Sobornost* 6 (1984): 6–28. Individual references are cited in the text.

⁵ While a comparison with literature is beyond the scope of this paper, the figure of the holy fool has played a significant role in the history of literature, especially since the sixteenth century. For a good summary of this history see Walter Kaiser, "Wisdom of the Fool," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 4, ed. Philip P. Wiener, (New York: Scribners, 1973), 515–520. For studies on individual authors see R. Chris Hassel, *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies*, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Robert H. Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in Ulysses*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995); Tim Prentki, *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Preston M. Browning, "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque Recovery of the Holy," in *Adversity and Grace*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 133–162; and Dana Heller and Elena Volkova, "The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue," *American Studies International* 41/1–2 (February 2003): 152–178.

⁶ Much of this section appeared in a slightly different form in my article "Screening the Silly: The Christian Iconography of Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco, giullare di Dio*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 15/1 (April 2011): http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol15.no1/Doebler_ScreeningSilly.html

⁷ "The Message of *The Flowers of St. Francis*," in *My Method: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni, (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 31.

⁸ Victoria Schultz, "Interview with Roberto Rossellini, February 22–25, 1971 in Houston, Texas," *Film Culture* 52 (Spring 1971): 14.

⁹ "The Message of *The Flowers of St. Francis*," 32.

¹⁰ "Cinema and Theology: The Case of *Heaven Over the Marshes*," trans. Bert Cardullo, *Journal of Religion and Film* 6/2 (October 2002): <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/heaven.htm>. Earlier Bazin makes the passing comment that "...Rossellini seems not to have emphasized too much the stigmata and the enchantment of the birds in his *Flowers of St. Francis*" but does not elaborate on the film.

¹¹ "The Message of *The Flowers of St. Francis*," 31.

¹² *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 164.

¹³ "In Defense of Rossellini: A letter to Guido Aristarco, editor-in-chief of *Cinema Nuovo*," in *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, trans. Hugh Gray, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 100.

¹⁴ Adriano Apra notes there were eleven episodes planned (the French title of the film attests to this) but one was cut at the last minute before screening at Venice, a scene where Francis meets a prostitute. See "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis,'" DVD, (New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

¹⁵ "Notes on My Father: An Interview with Isabella Rossellini," DVD, (New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

¹⁶ Rossellini had met them when he made the film *Paisan* in 1946. See "Adriano Apra on 'The Flowers of St. Francis.'"

¹⁷ “A Panorama of History, an interview with Francisco Llinas and Miguel Marias,” in *My Method: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Adriano Apra, trans. Annapaola Cancogni, (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 197–98.

¹⁸ See “Notes on My Father.”

¹⁹ Further information on the editing of the film can be seen in the data collected and posted by myself on the Cinematics website at http://www.cinematics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=4752.

²⁰ “Cinema and Theology: The Case of *Heaven Over the Marshes*,” trans. Bert Cardullo, *Journal of Religion and Film* 6/2 (October 2002): <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/heaven.htm>.

²¹ For Dreyer’s response on how the miracle in *Ordet* does not necessarily contradict science see his “The Cinematization of *Ordet*,” in *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, trans. Donald Skoller, (New York: Dutton, 1973), 164.

²² See Jean and Dale D. Drum, *My Only Great Passion: The Life and Films of Carl Th. Dreyer*. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 224.

²³ Quoted in Ole Storm, “Introduction,” Carl Theodore Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), 20 n.2. Also quoted in P. Adams Sitney, “Moments of Revelation: Dreyer’s Anachronistic Modernity,” in *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 58.

²⁴ Quoted in Carren O. Kaston, “Faith, Love, and Art: The Metaphysical Triangle in *Ordet*,” in *Carl Th. Dreyer*, ed. Jytte Jensen (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 69.

²⁵ “Faith, Love, and Art,” 68.

²⁶ “Moments of Revelation,” 63.

²⁷ Carney, Ray. *Speaking the Language of Desire: The Films of Carl Dreyer*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

²⁸ Schrader dismisses this comment as having any significance. However, it is one of the important deviations from Kaj Munk’s original play which says Johannes is crazy from tragic love. He had seen a play on miracles with his fiancée and was so moved he didn’t see a car coming and she pushed him out of the way and was killed. He tried to resurrect her but it failed and he had been mad since then. Dreyer cuts all this out and reduces the madness to Kierkegaard and the study of theology. See Sitney, “Moments of Revelation,” 66–8.

²⁹ In *For Examination/Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 36.

³⁰ “Imagination and Color,” in *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, ed. and trans. Donald Skoller (New York: Dutton, 1973), 179.

³¹ Information on the shot lengths in *Ordet* was gathered by myself using the technology available through the Cinematics website. Data for the film can be viewed at: http://www.cinematics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=1407. Adjusting the settings to a vertical resolution of 5 pixels/sec, a height of 1000 pix and a trendline of 9 (suggested by Yuri Tsivian in a user comment on the same web page) will give a good representation for the overall rhythm of the film visible in the red wave line.

³² “The Real Talking Film,” in *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, trans. Donald Skoller, (New York: Dutton, 1973), 52. This comment of Dreyer’s, made only a few years after his silent classic *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, is highlighted even more when compared with Yuri Tsivian’s graphic representation of this earlier film (see the

same webpage cited in note 27 above). Note also the average shot length of *Jeanne d'Arc* was only 3.1 seconds! However this does not mean that editing is insignificant in *Ordet*. Rather it is very important. The standard deviation between the shot lengths (the time difference between one shot and the shot that follows it) is 86.9 seconds, which sets up a tension between long and short shots.

³³ Quoted in Drum, *My Only Great Passion*, 235.

³⁴ See *Speaking the Language of Desire*, 199–200.

³⁵ *Speaking the Language of Desire*, 223.

³⁶ “Mise en Scène as Miracle in Dreyer’s *Ordet*,” Jonathan Rosenbaum website, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=8206>.

³⁷ “Moments of Revelation,” 68.

³⁸ Quoted in Drum, *My Only Great Passion*, 238.

³⁹ For Lerdorff Rye’s memory of this experience see Drum, *My Only Great Passion*, 239.

⁴⁰ See Drum, *My Only Great Passion*, 236.

⁴¹ In this respect it is interesting to note a deleted scene from the film related by Johannes’ actor Preben Lerdorff Rye. The scene was to take place after Johannes’ disappears but before the funeral: “One of the scenes that was left out I will never forget. As Johannes, I was on my knees on the heath near Vedersø praying, ‘Give me strength, dear God, give me a sign.’ No sooner had I said that than a ray of sunshine broke through the clouds and touched my face, which was illuminated just as though it were a sign from God. The sunbeam did not light my clothing or my hands, only my face, and that incident had a strange effect on those of us who were there. If this scene had been in the film, people would certainly have said, ‘That was certainly a clever lighting effect from Dreyer.’ But for us it was a memorable moment, and a great stillness came over us as we stood out there on the heath.” Quoted in Drum, *My Only Great Passion*, 231. Such a scene could have given the viewer privileged insight into the “real” psychology of Johannes, or even be read as an example of showing the hidden side of the holy fool who, when alone, is sane. By leaving it out the film withholds any easy explanation and thereby makes the viewer’s decision concerning Johannes more difficult.

⁴² After the miracle in brief succession we see how the other characters respond: Morten and Peter celebrate that the God of Elijah is still active and Mikkel tells Inger that he has “found her faith.”

⁴³ *Transcendental Style in Film*, 132.

⁴⁴ *Transcendental Style in Film*, 135.

⁴⁵ “The Fool as Prophet and Apostle,” 24.

⁴⁶ “Mise en Scène as Miracle in Dreyer’s *Ordet*.”

⁴⁷ Quoted in James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 147.

⁴⁸ Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, 147.

⁴⁹ “*Ikiru*: Narration as a Moral Act,” in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, ed. Arthur Nalletti, Jr. and David Desser, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 59.

- ⁵⁰ See *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 81–5.
- ⁵¹ See *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 85.
- ⁵² Quoted in Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 85.
- ⁵³ Quoted in Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 81.
- ⁵⁴ *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*, rev. ed, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 137.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted in Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 137.
- ⁵⁶ See Murav, *Holy Foolishness*.
- ⁵⁷ Stephen Prince argues that throughout *Ikiru* Kurosawa's stylistics, like those of Brecht, aim to control the viewer's emotional response. See *The Warrior's Camera*, 100–102. In contrast to this I am suggesting that the first half of the film encourages our identification with Watanabe which will intensify our reaction to the objective funeral sequence.
- ⁵⁸ Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 108.
- ⁵⁹ *Akira Kurosawa: Master of Cinema*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010), 80.
- ⁶⁰ Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 110.
- ⁶¹ *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 89.
- ⁶² *The Warrior's Camera*, 111.
- ⁶³ Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, 164.
- ⁶⁴ Quoted in Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 81.
- ⁶⁵ *The Warrior's Camera*, 101.
- ⁶⁶ *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elizabeth Brieve, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 66.

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