Looking for movies that might have relevance for monastics and the spiritually inclined, I stumbled upon this gem of a film. It could be my tendency to steer towards what Netflix categorizes (and now recommends to me) as “cerebral, dark, and understated.” Substituting “thoughtful and deep” for “dark” would be closer to the truth. Russian film and literature master this niche, and the Island, when it was released, swept all their top film awards.

The Island launches with a scene from World War Two: a young, frightened, Russian soldier is forced to make a terrible choice between a horrific, immoral act and losing his life. When the Nazis blow up his ship, he finds himself surprised to be alive, washed upon the shore of a Russian Orthodox monastery on a remote island in the White Sea. He joins the order, and we next meet him thirty years later as Father Anatoli, still trying to find redemption for his sin.

This may not sound like a compelling plot, but wait. Father Anatoli turns out to be an astonishing iconoclast, the hidden heart of the orderly monastery. Refusing to indulge in the comfort of the monastery proper, he lives in the filthy boiler room as the stoker, sleeping on a pile of coal. At any moment of the day or night he may sing a loud ditty from the bell tower. He won’t wear the carefully ironed vestments of the order—choosing instead to wear rags. He won’t follow the church rituals in ceremonies, but manages to disrupt the set sequence of prayers and ablutions by always doing the opposite of everyone else. His fellow brethren, trying their best to hide their foibles and past sins with placid facades, are constantly pushed to the edge of their tolerance.

At first, in the midst of the politics and positioning for power in the monastery, Father Anatoli antics seem random and haphazard. Yet slowly, over time, we begin to see that his mischiefousness might be the sword aimed right at the heart of hypocrisy and spiritual materialism. In one of my favorite scenes, he locks the head abbot in the boiler room for the night (with himself), until the abbot comes to realize that his life is a sham of superficial wants and greed.

Is Father Anatoli a madman or a holy man? For most of the film we aren’t really sure. By the time the movie ends, we’ve likely made a decision. His role in monastery life reminded me of a few similar stories. Whether accurate or not, the anecdotes teach similar lessons to those of the Island.
The first, from the legends of twentieth-century spiritual guru, George Gurdjieff, tells that he paid an irascible student to live in their midst and constantly annoy students. The trickster legends of Patrul Rinpoche also come to mind. Despite being a learned Buddhist scholar, he dismissed religious trappings and instead wandered through the mountains of Tibet, disguised in rags, playing pranks to convey sharp wisdom.

Of course, all along, the simple townsfolk have realized that Father Anatoli is an authentic spiritual presence, and line up for healings and prophecies. This is portrayed very matter-of-fact, as part of daily life, not with Hollywood hyperbole. Although gruff, Father Anatoli has the heart of a Bodhisatva. The director, Pavel Lungin, speaking of the central character’s self-awareness, says he doesn’t regard Father Anatoli as being clever or spiritual, but blessed “in the sense that he is an exposed nerve, which connects to the pains of this world. His absolute power is a reaction to the pain of those people who come to it.”

The film is so authentically and believably acted by Pyotr Mamonov, that I had to look into his personal history. It turns out that the film loosely parallels his real life. Mamonov was one of Russia’s few rock stars, but had a sudden conversion to Orthodox Christianity in the 1990s. Now he lives as a recluse in a isolated village far from civilization. The director, Lungin quipped, “To a large extent, he played himself.”

The stark landscape, the humble simplicity of Father Anatoli, the remoteness of the monastery on the White Sea, and the miracles of his redemption converge into a timeless snapshot of lived spirituality. The Patriarch of Moscow, Alexei II, praised The Island, Ostrov, for its profound depiction of faith and monastic life.

Sarah Conover has studied Buddhism with the Recollective Awareness sangha for the past fifteen years. She is the author of numerous books on world wisdom traditions and an enthusiastic supporter of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis.

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