CHAPTER 6

"A Vicious Circle": Karen Shakhnazarov's *Ward no. 6*

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Anton Chekhov's "Ward no. 6" (1892) has inspired a large and varied body of hypertexts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The story's basic premise of a psychiatric doctor who is incarcerated in the same mental hospital he used to run proved extraordinarily generative for Russian writers in the following century, especially given the notorious Soviet practice of labeling political dissidents insane. Valerii Tarsis and Venedikt Erofeev, among others, reflect this aspect of the story in their works.[1] Other major themes of "Ward no. 6," such as the unstable boundary between madness and sanity, psychological isolation from other people, and the elusive possibility of redemption—whether secular or otherworldly—have also proven important for Russian and Soviet writers.[2]

Several film directors in Russia and abroad have also transported this hypotext to the silver screen, with equally diverse results.[3] The most recent of these cinematic transpositions, Karen Shakhnazarov's 2009 *Ward no. 6*, represents a particularly innovative approach to Chekhov's story. If the dominant trend in the Russian *ekranizatsiia* (the term for screenings of literary works) of the early 2000s has been lengthy televised serials that attempt to depict the literary text as "accurately" as possible through period settings, Shakhnazarov diverges radically from this approach. *Ward no. 6* is set in a present-day mental hospital in the Moscow outskirts, formerly the Nikolo-Peshnoshskii monastery. Even more strikingly, the director intersperses Chekhov's fictional plot with interviews of actual patients, "mockumentary" interviews about the head psychiatric doctor Ragin, and amateur, home video-produced flashbacks of the fictional doctor's past. The actors and patients coexist on the same narrative plane, and the continual cutting back and forth between the documentary of the present-day patients, the mockumentary of Ragin, and the fictional plot has the deliberate effect of fragmenting Chekhov's narrative, and disorienting the viewer.[4] Shakhnazarov's film thus presents an unusual type of

border crossing, as he transforms Chekhov's story both temporally, with his early-twenty-first-century Russian setting, and generically, with his pastiche of cinematic genres.[5]

As I will argue, Shakhnazarov's mixture of genres and his contemporary setting of the plot, along with his selective rereading of the story, significantly shift Chekhov's thematic focus, developing the narrative in new directions. In particular, the director elaborates on Chekhov's references to child abuse and abandonment, emphasizing the cyclical effect of these problems on Russian society. In Chekhov's story, this theme is not as prominent as Ragin and Gromov's arguments about immortality, unjust imprisonment, and the choice of active resistance to evil vs. stoicism. Shakhnazarov further explores the theme of violence against children in his film by extending this material, recontextualizing it through real-life patient interviews, and highlighting the process of infantilization that takes place in the mental hospital. At the same time, he introduces two contrasting themes from nineteenth-century Russian culture in order to explore their significance for the present day: the possibility of Christian redemption, even in the face of the deepest suffering, and the less optimistic notion of degeneration theory, which proposes a hereditary "taint" (for both individuals and nations) that impedes progress from one generation to the next, or between eras of history, thus preventing the possibility of regeneration. Ultimately, the taint of the individual family reflects poorly on the health of the nation and, as a result, the easy transportation of Chekhov's story from the 1890s to the early twenty-first century suggests a national pathology that has yet to be addressed in a meaningful way.

CHEKHOV'S HYPOTEXT

In "Ward no. 6," Chekhov tells the story of a disillusioned provincial doctor, Andrei Ragin, who has adopted an attitude of disengagement from the suffering around him. Despite the abominable conditions of his hospital, he makes no effort at reform and rarely even visits for rounds, preferring to devote as much time as possible to intellectual activities. However, his conversations with one of the patients, Ivan Gromov, force him to reevaluate his ideological views, and lead to his increasing rejection of the outside world. Confronting the angry Gromov during their first meeting, Ragin claims that there is no essential difference between confinement and freedom, arguing that one can be happy under any circumstances through indifference to feeling. Gromov undermines this philosophy, rooted in stoicism, by pointing out that Ragin has never actually suffered forced confinement, physical abuse, or poverty. Ragin, who has displayed signs of erratic behavior with his younger colleague Khobotov and his friend Mikhail Averianych, is eventually pushed out of

his position and hospitalized in the very ward he had supervised. Faced with actual confinement, he suddenly realizes the flaws of his stoic philosophy (he immediately craves the physical comforts to which he is accustomed, such as tobacco and walks outside). Protesting the same conditions he had earlier minimized as unimportant, Ragin dies following a severe beating from the ward's brutal orderly, Nikita.

"Ward no. 6" occupies an unusual position in Chekhov's literary output. Having begun as a writer of humorous sketches (under the pseudonym of "Antosha Chekhonte") in order to support his family while he studied medicine in Moscow, Chekhov decided to devote himself full-time to writing in the late 1880s. This decision resulted in more developed short stories and longer works such as *The Steppe* (1888); it also led to some regret for putting his original chosen profession, medicine, on the back burner. "Ward no. 6," written in 1892, closely followed Chekhov's 1890 voyage to the penal colony of Sakhalin Island, a trip that the writer acknowledged taking in part to make up for what he perceived as a lack of usefulness to society after reducing his work as a doctor.[6] This six-month commitment involved extensive interviews with prisoners, medical treatment, and the first census ever taken of the island. It culminated in the 1895 non-fiction work *Sakhalin Island*, a description of the colony's horrific conditions that is all the more shocking for its typically Chekhovian understated tone. The book serves as a description of social, economic, and medical conditions of Russian settlers, most of whom were convicts, as well as the native Ainu and Gilyak populations. Among the deathly, unsanitary conditions Chekhov describes are filthy toilets, poor nutrition, prostitution, flogging, executions, and other dehumanizing conditions of the island. Chekhov's description of this fringe of an empire implicitly compares Sakhalin to Russia itself, using it to imply the awful conditions of Russia much as Fedor Dostoevskii subversively described the Siberian prisons as preferable in some ways to life for the majority of peasants in Russia in his quasi-fictional prison memoir *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861–2). Chekhov, quoting Baron Korf, remarks: "I am convinced that the 'unfortunates' live better on Sakhalin than in any other place in Russia or even in Europe."[7]

Along with this contribution to the all-too-extensive series of Russian prison narratives, Chekhov's trip left its mark on other works as well. *Uncle Vania* (1897), one of his four major plays, contains numerous references to prisons, mazes, and is occasionally punctuated by a watchman making rounds, underscoring the notion of the country estate as a prison.[8] One of his best-known stories, "The Lady with a Little Dog" (1898) refers to its adulterous protagonists, Dmitrii Gurov and Anna Sergeevna, as "two migratory birds, a male and a female, who had been caught and made to live in separate cages."[9] Such works metaphorically suggest the state of incarceration that Chekhov presents

more literally in *Sakhalin Island* and "Ward no. 6."[10] Chekhov deliberately describes the hospital in this story like a prison, suggesting uncomfortable parallels between the medical and penal institutions in late-nineteenth-century Russia.[11] This focus distinguishes the story stylistically as well. The opening, with its description of the facility, is unusual for Chekhov's fiction in that it incorporates documentary features:

> In the hospital yard there is a small outbuilding surrounded by a dense jungle of burdock, nettles and wild hemp. The roof is rusty, half of the chimney has collapsed, the steps to the door are rotten and overgrown with grass; only traces of plaster remain. The front faces the main hospital and the rear looks out on to open country, from which it is cut off by the grey hospital fence topped with nails. These nails, with their points sticking upwards, the fence and the outbuilding itself have that mournful, god-forsaken look that you find only in our hospitals and prisons.[12]

Because of this stylistic feature, Chekhov's story "invites" prospective filmmakers to envision his narrative as a generic mixture of fictional and documentary features.

SHAKHNAZAROV'S HYPERTEXT

Shakhnazarov highlights his provocative mixture of genres from the very beginning of the film. Although the title directs the viewer to think of Chekhov's story, the opening scene consists of interviews with actual psychiatric patients. An invisible cameraman, most likely Shakhnazarov himself, asks several patients in their twenties and thirties about their past, how they wound up in the institution, and their hopes for the future. Only after this scene, a voiceover recounting of the history of the hospital since medieval times, and an interview with Dr. Khobotov (Evgenii Stychkin) about mental illness (not included in Chekhov's story), does the director lead imperceptibly into the main plotline involving Ragin (Vladimir Il'in) and Gromov (Aleksei Vertkov).

As Yana Meerzon remarks, Shakhnazarov's juxtaposition of the fictional and the documentary evokes Chekhov's own mix of styles in his story, and in doing so calls into question the very notion of cinematic authenticity: "Shakhnazarov forces his audience to wonder whether what we see on-screen is real or fictional."[13] Meerzon argues that although Shakhnazarov clearly examines social ills and spiritual questions, the film is most interesting for its replication of Chekhov's generic complexity. Shakhnazarov's very mixing of genres encourages the viewer to question the ability of the camera accurately to

record and communicate the human experience. As John McCarthy similarly notes in his *Box Office Magazine* review of the film,

> The movie's documentary overlay suggests that for all our ability to record everyone on film with the [aid] of new technologies—i.e., without one authoritative camera—there still remains a level of human experience that can't be contained or communicated. Whether it's dismissed as absurd, avoided as disconcerting, or embraced as a source of solace, we find ourselves unable to escape religious and spiritual concerns. No matter how meticulously it is captured or relayed, a history is not a bulwark against uncertainty or madness. Then again, nor does it preclude knowledge and understanding.[14]

Shakhnazarov's setting of the story thus seems more interesting for its reordering and expression in various genres than for any development of the hypotext's actual content and themes. Indeed, for the most part, the director reproduces Chekhov's plot. With the important exception of a relatively "happy ending," in which Ragin survives his stroke and is able to celebrate the New Year, Shakhnazarov transfers Chekhov's content to his film.[15] However, through his references to Christianity and degeneration theory, the director actually forces the audience to view Chekhov's hypotext through a unique intertextual prism.

CHEKHOV AND DEGENERATION THEORY

Transpositions of literature into film, by necessity, involve multiple intertexts, as the film incorporates not only its hypotext, but also many of that work's sources. In developing Chekhov's material, and in his intermingling of several film genres, Shakhnazarov also reveals the richness of the writer's own intertextuality. In both cases of the themes he emphasizes—the underscoring of cyclical violence and the notion of spiritual regeneration—Shakhnazarov implicitly refers to one of Chekhov's key sources, Dostoevskii's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), with its concern for these same issues. In this manner, he adds new layers to a longstanding literary and cultural dialogue.

As explorations of the possibilities of redemption from cyclical evil, especially in the context of mental illness, Shakhnazarov's, Chekhov's, and Dostoevskii's respective narratives can be productively framed by the "degeneration theory" that dominated Russian and European thought on mental illness at the turn of the twentieth century. Frederick H. White, in a recent study on degeneration theory and turn-of-the-century writing, traces an evolving discourse on madness in works on the subject by Vsevolod Garshin, Chekhov, and Leonid Andreev.[16] Chekhov's "Ward no. 6" replaces the romantic narrative of heroic

madness employed by Garshin in his 1883 story "The Red Poppy" with a more scientifically oriented discourse, which reflects an implied distrust of psychiatry as a science, since the fate of Ragin suggests that anyone can be declared insane simply for exhibiting such "abnormal" behavior as enjoying the company of a patient.[17] As White points out, *The Brothers Karamazov* seemed to exhibit for Russian writers, Chekhov included, what was being asserted as scientific fact by European medical theorists like Benedict Morel, Cesare Lombroso, and even Max Nordau, who wanted to demonstrate that moral and psychological degeneration was hereditary in nature. Russian readers only had to look at the Karamazov family to understand what these medical personages were asserting so assuredly.[18] Based on Dostoevskii's own critique, especially in the *Writer's Diary*, of environment as an external explanation of crime that could substitute for personal guilt and repentance, and his fervent belief in the power of human freedom and choice in everyday and spiritual matters, it is likely that he would have rejected the hereditary explanations for human behavior that were in vogue in the decades after his death. Nevertheless, Dostoevskii's readers themselves were fully aware of these theories, and could read them into his works.

Chekhov's views on the theory of the hereditary taint, of which he was certainly cognizant, shifted from the late 1880s through the 1890s. His early enthusiasm for Darwinian evolution was tempered by his concerns about the popular Social Darwinist theories of his time. As Michael Finke shows, Chekhov feared his own possible degeneration (his tuberculosis was thought to be inherited), but also viewed his life as a battle to overcome this supposedly hereditary condition.[19] His progressive doubts concerning hereditary degeneration can be seen not only in "Ward no. 6," but also in his story "The Duel" of the same year. In "The Duel," a dissipated romantic, Ivan Laevskii, drinks, gambles, and carries on an affair with a married woman, Nadezhda, with whom he has grown tired. His former friend Von Koren, a zoologist and proponent of Social Darwinism, challenges him to a duel, out of sheer animosity. The duel is stopped before either man dies, however. Afterwards, Laevskii, to Von Koren's surprise, reforms, recommitting himself to Nadezhda and working to improve his financial situation. Thus, Von Koren's explicitly stated conviction of his opponent's degenerative tendencies is proven decisively incorrect.[20] As Finke argues, Chekhov also rejected these deterministic views in "Ward no. 6," and critiqued the notion of heredity as a cause of Gromov's and Ragin's incarceration.[21]

Regardless of whether the characters' fates stem from heredity, parental upbringing, or the characters' own choices, however, Chekhov describes a distinctly cyclical effect from generation to generation, and raises the question of whether it can be overcome. Shakhnazarov, in turn, picks up on this theme, and attempts to resolve the question in his own way. He does so primarily by exploring the state of contemporary mental hospitals and contrasting them

unfavorably to those of earlier eras, particularly in their lack of progress in treating patients with compassion. Perhaps the very fact that the same subject of abuse of mental patients turned out to be as apt in 2009 post-Soviet Russia as it was in 1988 Soviet Russia, when he first conceived of the film (or in 1892 imperial Russia, for that matter), demonstrates the intractable nature of the problem.

OPENING INTERVIEWS

Although Shakhnazarov does not attempt to mute the continuing horrors of incarceration in a mental hospital through the twentieth century and beyond, his portrayal of them is noticeably different from Chekhov's. In the first pages of "Ward no. 6," Chekhov focuses on the physical conditions of the hospital, before moving on to its moral and psychological decrepitude. He refers to the hospital's "black as soot" ceiling, and "a stench that immediately makes you think you are entering a zoo."[22] In Shakhnazarov's film, by contrast, the mental ward itself is actually almost cheery, with fairly comfortable-looking cots, a clean appearance, food that resembles common Russian café fare,

Figure 6.1 Vladimir Kozlov, an actual patient interviewed in *Ward no. 6*.

tapestries on the wall in the sleeping area, and encouragement of the patients' artistic and other talents.[23] This does not mean that the hospital experience is any less harrowing; but the focus is shifted immediately from the rotten conditions observed early in the story to more philosophical questions of captivity and freedom.[24]

The interviews of present-day patients that open the film are a key to understanding Shakhnazarov's particular interest in Chekhov's story and its relevance for past and present Russian reality. They offer a concise summary of the story's major themes and recontextualize them in current Russian reality. Through them, Shakhnazarov "doubles" major parts of the conversations between Ragin and Gromov—particularly on childhood trauma, redemption, and immortality—that he reproduces later in the narrative. The following selection from the first patient's interview illustrates these concerns:

> PATIENT: Kozlov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Born Aug. 15, 1979.
> INTERVIEWER: How long have you lived here?
> PATIENT: It's my fifth year here.
> INTERVIEWER: And before that?
> PATIENT: Moscow Boarding Home 30. And before that it was the school for handicapped children. I got there after … After my parents abandoned me at five. I mean, they didn't exactly abandon me. They were deprived of parental rights and I was given over to public custody. I had good teachers. They taught me a lot: cooking, sports. […]
> INTERVIEWER: Have you got a dream?
> PATIENT: Yes.
> INTERVIEWER: What is it?
> PATIENT: I want to leave here, have a family, children, work … Cause I'm fed up … Twenty-five years of life at public expense because of my parents, those alkies deprived of parental rights … They were gone before their time. They left me to the memory of fate.

The most striking part of this interview, perhaps, is the patient's focus on the roots of his mental illness and lot in life in his upbringing by alcoholic, incompetent parents.[25] This becomes a refrain in the interviews. The patients do *not*, as we might expect given the Chekhovian narrative that follows, complain about hospital conditions: in some cases they even praise them. They trace their present-day fate to their parents' alcoholism, irresponsibility, and abandonment of them, rather than emphasizing the unfairness of an institution that treats patients like prisoners. The second (unnamed) patient similarly refers to his parents' abandoning him, blaming it for his growing up to be a "hooligan" in the orphanages. He remarks: "If they had taken care of me earlier, when I was little, I might have become a normal man." The third patient, after

describing his mother and where she lives, admits that he has never seen her: "She disowned me right after I was born."

Given the attention the problem of Russian orphans has received in the last several years, which have witnessed Vladimir Putin's 2012 ban on American adoptions, this part of the film is even more topical now than when Shakhnazarov first conceived of the film in the last years of the Soviet Union. As of 2013, approximately 120,000 children, many of whom—like these prisoners—are mentally and physically disabled, become orphaned each year. Out of the over 650,000 registered orphans in Russia, more than half grow up in orphanages, and move on to other government institutions as adults.[26] Moreover, the over-diagnosis of orphans as mentally or physically disabled confirms that the notion of a hereditary taint exists today, just as it did in the 1890s: "Even if abandoned infants do not display severe physical or mental disabilities, however, they often come from families with chronic social, financial and health problems—including alcoholism—and they cannot escape the stigma applied to that past."[27] The lack of proper diagnosis, and the resulting ill-treatment of children in orphanages and—later—in mental hospitals often leads to overcrowding of facilities, poor hygiene, and inadequate care that allows the initial misdiagnosis to come true.

> Even in the best case, children who are closest to normal health at birth become retarded to some degree after these four years of collective living, deprived of individual nurture. An alarming number of less resilient infants seem to succumb to a self-fulfilling diagnosis of retarded.[28]

Thus, a vicious cycle is perpetuated, in which parents with alcoholism, poverty, and other social problems abandon infants; the orphans are ill-treated and stigmatized, and eventually fall into the same habits as their parents.

The interviewer also asks the patients to describe their hopes and dreams, which inspires varying responses. Significantly, in two cases, the patients express a desire to meet a girl, get married, and have children. The first patient (Kozlov) speaks of wanting to free himself from "twenty-five years of living at government expense." In conjunction with the description of their childhoods, these responses convey a desire to break the cycle of abandonment, abuse, and dependence by becoming independent people capable of having families, caring for others, and living normal lives. The second patient, by contrast, remarks with a pessimistic laugh that "only death can change me," and the fourth frankly answers: "You shouldn't believe in dreams. They never come true." The interviewer also solicits the patients' ideas on God and immortality. Kozlov answers that though he was baptized, he only has faith in himself and his own potential. The second patient, however, remarks that he believes in good overcoming evil. To the cameraman's approving remark ("It's good

that you have faith"[29]), he responds: "Of course I believe, and I will [continue to] believe." Thus the patients give contrasting responses, and the question of hope for the future is left ambiguous.

By placing these interviews at the beginning of the film, Shakhnazarov draws attention to aspects of Chekhov's hypotext that are of crucial importance, but may not necessarily strike the reader as such on first reading. The question of immortality, a crucial part of Ragin's discussions with Gromov, is easier to recall, and connect back to the story's themes. Less visible, perhaps, is the question of child abuse and abandonment, and the cycle of harm it creates. However, this turns out to be a very important part of the discussion as well: Gromov's attempt in Chekhov's story to prove that Ragin has not experienced true suffering, and therefore has no right to preach his "stoic" attitude toward it to those who are in the captivity of a mental ward, hinges on his childhood experience. Gromov tells Ragin in their first conversation that he (like Chekhov himself) was cruelly beaten as a child, and asks if Ragin too was beaten. The doctor responds that his parents "were averse to corporal punishment."[30] Gromov's father's conviction for embezzlement and subsequent death has destroyed the family, and most likely brought on the son's persecution mania. As Finke points out, however, Gromov is incorrect, as both patients, in fact, have experienced some type of parental abuse.[31] The narrator reports that Ragin only became a doctor because his father had threatened him with disownment if he followed his chosen vocation of the priesthood; Ragin was thereby condemned to a profession in which he had no interest. In this sense, Ragin and Gromov have both in effect been stunted (physically and/or spiritually) by their fathers. The main themes of Shakhnazarov's interviews—the effect of destructive parents and the question of immortality—thus recall Ragin's and Gromov's own biographies and discussions.

CHEKHOV, DOSTOEVSKII, AND THE HEREDITARY TAINT

The opening interviews of the film, by extension, also bring to mind *The Brothers Karamazov*, which focuses even more overtly on abused children and religious belief. Andrew Durkin has noted many parallels between the two works, especially Chekhov's numerous allusions to Ivan Karamazov. Gromov shares this character's first name, background as an intellectual who devours books and ends up going mad, polemical style, and murderous expressions.[32] As he puts it, "Gromov has assimilated several of Dostoevskii's crucial concerns (cruelty to children, immortality, the existence of God)."[33] Ragin also shares key traits with Ivan Karamazov, since he denies immortality,

arrives at the truth only at the cost of his sanity, and—like Ivan with his Devil—is forced to confront the banality of his own ideas.

Chekhov's focus on the cyclicality of evil also recalls Dostoevskii's novel. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, absent or abusive parents create a chain of violence and abuse. Following the opening descriptions of the three Karamazov brothers, Dmitrii, Ivan, and Alesha, the narrator reports that their father simply "forgot" them. Dostoevskii implicitly ties Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov's negative act of forgetting his sons to his own fate. Crucially, when Alesha falls into a fit as his father speaks disrespectfully of his mother, Fedor Pavlovich inadvertently insults Ivan by forgetting his parentage; the furious Ivan will eventually play an important role in his father's murder. And as Vladimir Golstein argues, Fedor Pavlovich's putative illegitimate son Smerdiakov's violent actions—including the actual patricide—can be connected to his ill-treatment by three father figures: his presumptive biological father; his adoptive father, the abusive servant Grigorii; and his intellectual "father" Ivan, whose ideological principle that without God "all is permitted" sows the seeds of patricide.[34] Dostoevskii proposes that only a breaking of this chain can remove—or at least mitigate—the sins of the father. He optimistically implies that surrogacy can accomplish this by countering the effects of an absent or abusive father. Alesha takes on Father Zosima, the revered spiritual leader of the local monastery, as a substitute for Fedor Pavlovich, and then fulfills a similar role in mentoring Kolia Krasotkin and his schoolmates. Similarly, Dostoevskii contrasts the Snegirevs with the Karamazovs, as Captain Snegirev's love for his dying son Il'iusha and Il'iusha's fierce loyalty toward his father offer an alternative model of father–son relations.

Chekhov draws darker conclusions than his predecessor in his portrayal of the impact of fathers on sons, and more importantly, the difficulty of breaking damaging patterns from generation to generation. "Ward no. 6" is filled with cruel repetition and cyclicality, as destructive and inhumane events repeat themselves in both immediate and more large-scale temporal contexts. Ragin becoming a patient in his own psychiatric ward is the most obvious such example. Gromov sadistically points out the irony of this turn of events: "Once you used to drink people's blood, now they'll be drinking yours."[35] Smaller examples of this repetition occur throughout the narrative. Gromov's violent language when he first sees Ragin ("Thief! Charlatan! Hangman!"[36]) is echoed later by Ragin himself, who yells at his replacement, Dr. Khobotov, and his meddling friend Mikhail Averianych and tells them to go to hell. The cyclicality embedded in Chekhov's plot creates a sense of deadly repetition and entrapment, which Ragin refers to three times in one of his conversations with Mikhail Averianych: "I've fallen into a vicious circle. Everything—even the genuine concern of my friend—points the same way—to my eventual destruction."[37]

On a larger scale, this cyclicality underscores possible patterns of hereditary degeneration. According to the medical science of Chekhov's day, the law of progressivity suggested that destructive biological material (immoral behavior as well) could be transmitted within a family. Over the course of several generations, early signs of degeneration (neurasthenia being one possibility), might progress within the family to alcoholism and, eventually, to idiocy. The belief was that criminal and immoral behaviors were not socially constructed, but indications of a hereditary taint, an outward sign of a person (and, ultimately, a nation) in the process of devolution.[38] Gromov's incarceration in a hospital essentially repeats the fate of his father, who has died in a prison hospital following his arrest for embezzlement. A combination of parental abuse and absence triggers his break from sanity, and leads him down the same path as his father. Ragin similarly reacts adversely to his own father's violence (discouragement of his spiritual development) by retreating into the world of books, and refusing to engage others. Chekhov seems to doubt the possibility of recovery from this cycle. The hospital offers surrogate parents, to be sure, but they are even more abusive. The individual, Chekhov implies, can only achieve transformation on his own. Tragically, Ragin's realization that his stoical philosophy was bankrupt in the face of actual suffering comes too late for him to gain more than a moment of redemption, as he dies shortly after his stroke.[39]

In an interview for the film, Shakhnazarov compares Dostoevskii and Chekhov as "religious writers," so he may very well have had *The Brothers Karamazov* and its impact on "Ward no. 6" in mind when working on this film.[40] By prefacing Chekhov's plot with these real-life interviews on the same themes, he extends this dialogue, encouraging us to re-examine this feature of the story and its predecessor. The opening interviews seem to leave the issue unresolved. Two of the patients hope to break the pattern of abuse by marrying and having families, and by freeing themselves from a journey from parent figure to parent figure. The comments by the other two that only death can change them, and that it is useless to hope, on the other hand, imply the impossibility of interrupting the law of progressivity. Moreover, unlike his predecessors, Shakhnazarov also emphasizes the role of mothers in this social crisis; he thus suggests that the crisis is more pervasive even than in previous eras.

PARENT–CHILD RELATIONS IN *WARD NO. 6*

Like Chekhov and Dostoevskii before him, Shakhnazarov explores metaphorical parent–child relations. The mental hospitals in both versions of "Ward no. 6" demonstrate this quite dramatically through the relations between

abusive father figures—those in charge of the ward—and the patients, who are placed in subservient, child-like positions. Chekhov portrays the role of the ward officials in relation to the patients much as Michel Foucault describes the state taking on the role of a father figure for the mentally ill, treating them as children and giving them minority status. Foucault argues that medical professionals exercised moral and social authority over the minority status of the mentally ill, relying on the parental techniques of authority, judgment, punishment, and love.[41]

If anything, however, the ward's relatively civilized appearance in the film underscores a problem that is present but understated in Chekhov. The hospital becomes not just a prison, in which one has little hope of being cured, but also a return to a bleak childhood. Shakhnazarov uses the film's various genres to emphasize a kind of infantilization of the prisoners by "father figures" Khobotov and Nikita (Viktor Solov'ev), in which patients are condescended to, punished for rebellion, and rewarded for good behavior.

Several of the interpolated scenes in the film—particularly those involving actual patients—develop this theme of infantilization. The "mockumentary" interview of Ragin's replacement, Khobotov, early in the film demonstrates it. Following his discussion of the borderline between the "normal" and the mentally ill, the doctor proceeds to treat an artistic patient with condescending friendliness, referring to him as an avant-garde artist despite the patient's insistence that he's a realist. He also brushes aside the patient's complaint of "too many injections," clearly viewing him and the other patients as nothing more than case studies. Ragin, by contrast, is shown to have a more egalitarian attitude toward patients, as he sits on the bed with Gromov during their conversations (as in Chekhov's story) and takes him seriously as an equal from the beginning. Thus, by adding this "mockumentary" interview, Shakhnazarov seems to contrast two modes of doctor–patient relations. These contrasting relations are already present in Chekhov's story, but Shakhnazarov reinforces them by interpolating parallel interviews with real patients.

The conclusion of the film's narrative, which alters Chekhov's considerably, similarly focuses on the theme of parenting in relation to Russia's future. Following Ragin and Gromov's beating, Shakhnazarov transforms the brutal Nikita into a more benevolent "father figure," who somewhat grimly hands out presents and invites the patients to celebrate the New Year by dancing with female patients from another ward. We find out here that—unlike in Chekhov's story—Ragin has survived his stroke, although he is expressionless and incapable of speech.

This alteration may seem to be a tacked-on "happy ending": Shakhnazarov is clearly trying to interject a note of hope through the pop tune, the Christmas tree, and "Happy New Year" sign, with their obvious religious and secular associations with birth and renewal. One could argue, though, that several

Figure 6.2 The real and fictional patients of the ward at the New Year's party.

factors vitiate this optimism. The image of Nikita leading a celebration, immediately following the scene of his brutal beating of Ragin and Gromov, seems incongruous and even grotesque. Ragin's stunned, uncomprehending expression and slumped posture here and during the dance that follows also add a note of despair.[42] Arguably, the lasting image is of the patients' continuing infantilization, as they are given what look like children's gifts; the dance that follows seems like a parody of a New Year's celebration, or a secondary school dance. In Chekhov's story, after all, Ragin at one point thinks to himself: "They put on shows and organize dances for lunatics, but still they don't let them go out when they want to," which would seem to indicate a certain futility in the event.[43]

SHAKHNAZAROV'S ENDING

The final scene of *Ward no. 6*, which also focuses on the issue of parenting, leaves the film in an uncertain state regarding future generations, and the future of Russia. In this sense, Shakhnazarov marks a position somewhere in between Dostoevskii's hopes for an overcoming of the cycle of father–son strife in the later parts of his novel and the pessimism expressed by Chekhov in his story. In a final "mockumentary" scene, Shakhnazarov films an interview with the widow Belova, whose daughters Ragin used to care for when her drunken, violent boyfriend visited and caused scenes. The scene is drawn from an offhand comment in the hypotext following Ragin's relinquishing of his hospital lodgings in order to become a boarder in a small house in

town. The narrator reports that the landlady's lover often terrifies her children at night: "Feeling sorry for the weeping children, the doctor would take them to his room and put them to sleep on the floor, which gave him great satisfaction."[44]

Shakhnazarov, drawing out the possible implications of this line, expands it into the final scene of the film. Belova, sitting on the couch with her daughters, describes Ragin's kindness to them, asking her daughters about him.

> BELOVA: My lover sometimes stayed the night … Always drunk, he'd install himself in the kitchen, terrifying everyone, clamoring for vodka. My kids were terrified … and cried … The doctor would take them into his room and lay them to rest, which gave him great pleasure. (Turning to her younger daughter.) Remember Uncle Andriusha?
> DAUGHTER: Yes.
> BELOVA: What kind of person was he?
> DAUGHTER: Very nice. We loved him very much.

The girls nod, and the younger one controls her mirth with great difficulty, finally bursting into laughter. In the final shot, the camera pans back and forth between the younger sister laughing and the older one showing a more subdued, serious expression with only a faint smile, briefly panning upwards to the 2008 calendar before moving back to Belova and her daughters.

It is possible to interpret the passage to a new year in light of the redemption and regeneration suggested by the New Year's party of the previous scene. The film's final scene may be an attempt to resolve the problem of degeneration in a positive manner, as Ragin's interactions with Belova's daughters have clearly improved a difficult situation in a small way. Shakhnazarov draws out a minor, easy-to-miss comment in Chekhov's story, using it to force the audience to rethink the issue of personal and national degeneration. If our final images of Ragin in Chekhov's story are of his brutal death, slipping into oblivion, and the lack of impact on those around him (his funeral is attended only by Mikhail Averianych and his housekeeper Dariushka), Shakhnazarov leaves us not only with his survival of Nikita's beating but also an image of paternal kindliness to the younger generation. The director implies the possibility, at least, of breaking the cycle of harsh parental behavior. The girls' father is absent, the surrogate father (Belova's boyfriend) is cruel, and Belova herself is damaged by her ill-treatment as a single mother at the hands of a cruel man; however, Ragin's surrogate parenthood, potentially, can contribute toward healing this trauma. The brief shot of the newly begun 2008 calendar, in this light, recalls the celebration at the mental hospital, and reinforces the possibilities of rebirth that it offers. The camera's focus on the older daughter's sad, wistful smile, however, provides a more sobering

image of the future; Ragin's contribution is most likely too small to affect the problem in any major way. More likely, Shakhnazarov uses the image to note the ongoing nature of alcoholism, broken homes, and abusive mental hospitals and prisons, problems that continue unabated more than a century after Chekhov and Dostoevskii explored them in their literary works. Until the cycle is interrupted at some deeper level, Shakhnazarov seems to imply, the cycle of national tragedy will continue for another century.

CONCLUSIONS

Shakhnazarov's film reveals some discrepancy between the director's intent and the film's actual effect on the audience. At several points in *Ward no. 6*, Shakhnazarov attempts to draw out the potential for religious redemption from Chekhov's text. In his first scene after the credits, which follow the opening interviews of the patients, a child voice-over details the history of the monastery, and its transformation into a mental hospital. In this scene, a miracle is reported, as a young girl, thought to be dead, is revealed to be alive in her coffin. The scene ends with several monks and nuns following a deer; one of these nuns is revealed in the final scene to be the attractive girl who invites the mute Ragin to dance with her in the New Year's festivities led by Nikita. These early scenes, like the New Year's celebration to which they are symbolically connected, offer images of resurrection and regeneration, and implicitly suggest the healing potential of Christianity through the monastic tradition.

These passages have a somewhat tenuous connection to Chekhov's narrative. In the story's final paragraphs, Chekhov shows Ragin's final state of mind before descending into oblivion. Ragin thinks of the millions of people who believe in immortality, and wonders if it really does exist.

> But he had no desire for immortality and he thought about it for only one fleeting moment. A herd of exceptionally beautiful and graceful deer, of which he had been reading the day before, darted past him; then a peasant woman held out a registered letter to him. Mikhail Averyanych said something. Then everything disappeared and Ragin sank into everlasting oblivion.[45]

Shakhnazarov, in his transposition of these final thoughts, clearly aims to respond in a more positive way to Chekhov's question, answering Ragin's doubts with a vision of possible immortality, and turning the vision of the deer into a key to regeneration. In this manner, he attempts to outline a way in which cycles can be broken, and brutality can be transformed into its opposite.

The end of the film, however, with the New Year's celebration undermined by the continuing infantilization of the patients, casts great doubt on the possibility of religious or secular regeneration. Shakhnazarov's dialogue with his predecessors regarding cyclical violence and the victimization of children is thus left somewhat open-ended in *Ward no. 6*. If anything, the nineteenth-century Russian concern for children and their degeneration at the hands (or due to the hereditary taints) of their parents, is magnified, as the director grafts Chekhov's plot onto a present-day Russia that is burdened by an ever-increasing number of children in orphanages. Shakhnazarov, through this recontextualization, suggests that the "vicious circle" of violence and abuse that Chekhov and other writers depicted in a previous century is equally characteristic of contemporary Russia, and that breaking this cycle is still as challenging as it was in the nineteenth century.

NOTES

1. Tarsis, in his 1963 autobiographical novel *Ward no. 7* (*Palata nomer sem'*) employs Chekhov's story as its primary intertext in fictionalizing his confinement in Moscow's Kashchenko Hospital. In his 1985 play *Walpurgis Night, or the Steps of the Commander* (*Ostav'te moiu dushu v pokoe: pochti vse*), Erofeev, also exploring the theme of psychiatric incarceration in the Soviet Union, creates a ruthless orderly named "Borenka Mordovorov" who resembles Chekhov's brutal Nikita. As Lyudmila Parts points out, the Soviet interpretation of Chekhov's story as a symbol of tsarist Russia, in the late-nineteenth century, becomes an anti-Soviet interpretation, as writers protest the Soviet practice of incarcerating dissidents in mental hospitals. Parts, *The Chekhovian Intertext*.
2. See Parts, *The Chekhovian Intertext*; Brintlinger, "Introduction."
3. Kirill Serebrennikov filmed the story in 2005, as *Ragin*. Earlier, Karl Fruchtmann (*Krankensaal 6*, 1974) and Krzysztof Gruber (*Sala nr 6*, 1987) also produced transpositions of the story.
4. In some ways, this blurring of boundaries recalls the effect of Louis Malle's 1994 *Vanya on 42nd Street*, in which, following an opening scene of actors gathering around an old building to rehearse *Uncle Vania*, their conversation merges imperceptibly into the rehearsal itself, thus obscuring the lines between life and theater.
5. The film was conceived much earlier than its actual production. Shakhnazarov originally wrote the script with Aleksandr Borodianskii in 1988 for an Italian co-production that was supposed to star Marcello Mastroianni as Ragin. Disagreements with the Italian producers, however, led to the cancellation of the film. Shakhnazarov resisted their desire to use period costumes, as he wanted a contemporary setting. In an interview, he describes the film as "an attempt to immerse Chekhov's plot in a contemporary, authentic atmosphere." Parsegova, "Karen Shakhnazarov." Eventually, he was able to do so, filming it two decades later with Vladimir Il'in in the starring role. The idea of mixing genres, therefore, long preceded the actual making of *Ward no. 6*. In the intervening two decades, Shakhnazarov continued his exploration of the theme of mental illness. In his 1991 film *Assassin of the Tsar*, a patient named Timofeev, who believes he has assassinated both Tsars Aleksandr II and Nikolai II, gradually draws his doctor into his web of delusion. But

Shakhnazarov's updated exploration of the fine line between insanity and "normalcy" in *Ward no. 6* raises new concerns in light of the intervening two decades.

6. Chekhov draws a direct parallel between this project and his work as a doctor in a letter to his friend Aleksei Suvorin: "I wanted to write a couple of hundred pages [on Sakhalin], and in this way repay in some small part the debt I owe to medicine, which, as you know, I have neglected like a swine." Chekhov, *The Island*, xviii.
7. Ibid., 27.
8. The aging intellectual Aleksandr Serebriakov voices a general sense of confinement with his comment "This place—it's like a prison." Chekhov, *The Plays*, 220.
9. Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*, 183.
10. For more on the connection between "Ward no. 6" and *Sakhalin Island*, see Knapp, "Fear and Pity in 'Ward Six'."
11. Ibid., 145–7.
12. Chekhov, "Ward no. 6," 30.
13. Meerzon, "Interrogating the Real," 288.
14. McCarthy, "Ward no. 6."
15. Although the film was entered as Russia's Oscar nomination for foreign language film, Russian reviews of the film were mostly negative. Dmitrii Zhigalov, for example, calls it a "dry, boring setting of the story," and criticizes Shakhnazarov's deliberate use of a shaking hand-held camera in some scenes. Zhigalov, "Palata bez talantov." Western reviews were more positive, overall. As Amber Wilkinson opines, "Much more complex than it first appears and fully deserving of its selection as Russia's foreign language Oscar nominee this year, *Ward no. 6* persuasively prods at our preconceptions of 'madness,' calling on us not to just look at the exposed prejudices of the story's protagonists but to see how closely they mirror our own." Wilkinson, "Ward 6 (2009) Film Review."
16. White, *Degeneration, decadence, and disease*.
17. Ibid., 258.
18. Ibid., 31.
19. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 106.
20. Ibid., 105–6.
21. Ibid., 115–16. As Finke remarks, "In terms of the fundamental opposition between 'nature' and 'nurture,' Chekhov lays the groundwork for an environmental rather than a hereditary understanding of the psychopathology of both Gromov and Ragin." Ibid., 115.
22. Chekhov, "Ward no. 6," 31.
23. As Margarita Odesskaya points out, Chekhov deliberately portrays conditions in the hospital of "Ward no. 6" as worse than the typical such institution in order to make it resemble a prison, and to make a counterargument against those who thought the *zemstvos* would lead to improvement in social medicine: "in both stories ['Ward no. 6' and 'The Black Monk'], Chekhov demonstrated the helplessness of medicine and society in the face of mental illness, as well as people's intolerance toward those who differ in any way from their own understanding of the norm." Odesskaya, "'Let Them Go Crazy,'" 204–5.
24. Here, too, Shakhnazarov may have Dostoevskii in mind. In his quasi-fictional prison memoir, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861–2), Dostoevskii remarks that the prison conditions were not as awful as one might think, emphasizing the lack of freedom as the worst aspect of the convicts' lives.
25. In this sense, Shakhnazarov can be linked to the numerous post-Soviet directors who have made paternity a central focus. This theme has been discussed in depth recently in Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova's compilation *Cinepaternity*, which highlights the ways Russian film has explored the current crisis of absent fathers, failed surrogates, and their

damaging impact on male adolescents. I would argue that Shakhnazarov shares this focus to an extent, but expands it to include failed mothers as well.

26. From 1992 to 1998, the annual rate of abandoned children nearly doubled from about 67,000 to 113,000 (*Abandoned to the State*, 4–5). At the present time, it is closer to 120,000. See Odynova, "State of the Wards," 30.
27. *Abandoned to the State*, 3.
28. Ibid., 25.
29. Shakhnazarov here voices Ragin's approval of Gromov's belief in immortality ("It's good that you believe. With faith such as yours you would be living in clover even if you were bricked up in a wall." Chekhov, "Ward no. 6," 55.
30. Ibid., 61.
31. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 115.
32. Durkin, "Chekhov's Response to Dostoevskii," 49–59.
33. Ibid., 54.
34. See Golstein, "Accidental Families and Surrogate Fathers."
35. Chekhov, "Ward no. 6," 80.
36. Ibid., 53.
37. Ibid., 78.
38. White, *Degeneration, decadence, and disease*, 40.
39. Igor Sukhikh, however, emphasizes the importance of Ragin's epiphany: "Various characters, who often have not withstood a test of their humanity, are granted by Chekhov a moment of truth and beauty, on the threshold of death, at a point when they can no longer change anything." Sukhikh, "The Death of the Hero," 105.
40. See Parsegova, "Karen Shakhnazarov." Shakhnazarov claims that Chekhov is no less a religious writer than Dostoevsky, although his views on it are more hidden, more dispersed: "The religious subtext is hidden, but deliberate: Gromov's remarks about immortality, and the reference to Ragin wanting to study in a seminary." Ibid. (my translation).
41. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, *passim*.
42. This scene may be a reference to the Christmas party in Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in which Jack Nicholson's Randle McMurphy rebels against the strict hospital regime, and is eventually lobotomized.
43. Chekhov, "Ward no. 6," 51.
44. Ibid., 73.
45. Ibid., 85.