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# 5

## SPATIAL TRANSGRESSION, ANXIETY, AND THE DISCOURSE OF PUSSY RIOT'S "PUNK PRAYER"

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### **ABSTRACT**

The 2012 performance of Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, their subsequent release of an extended and edited video, and their ultimate arrest for committing "hooliganism" generated a large amount of interest both within Russia and on an international scale. While Western accounts and analyses were marked by their tendency to frame the political content, Russian responses were framed by references to tradition and history. Significantly, there was disagreement amongst the latter with regard to the activist value of Pussy Riot. I argue that this ambiguity arises from a profound socio-spatial anxiety that was triggered by the Pussy Riot performances but was never examined. At the core of the anxiety lies a discomfort with the implications of Pussy Riot's spatial transgressions because the techniques used to engage in activism ultimately invoked regimes of vision and technology to exert power over the public that implicitly resembles surveillance techniques used by the very object of criticism, the Russian regime.

### **KEYWORDS**

Russia, protest, activism, YouTube

## INTRODUCTION

### **Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer** (Tayler, 2012)

*Virgin birth giver of God, drive away Putin*  
*Drive away Putin, drive away Putin*  
*Black frock, golden epaulettes*  
*Parishioners crawl bowing*  
*Freedom's ghost [has gone to] heaven*  
*A gay pride parade [has been] sent to Siberia in shackles*  
*Their chief saint is the head of the KGB*  
*He leads a convoy of protestors to jail*  
*So as not to insult the Holiest One*  
*Woman should bear children and love*  
*Shit, shit, the Lord's shit, shit, shit, the Lord's shit*  
*Virgin birth giver of God, become a feminist*  
*Become a feminist, become a feminist*  
*The Church praises rotten leaders*  
*The march of the cross consists of black limousines*  
*A preacher is on his way to your school*  
*Go to class and give him money*  
*Patriarch Gundyay believes in Putin*  
*Would be better, the bastard, if he believed in God*  
*The Virgin's belt won't replace political gatherings*  
*The eternal Virgin Mary is with us in our protests*  
*Virgin birth Giver of God, drive away Putin*  
*Drive away Putin, drive away Putin*

The performance of Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" on February 21, 2012 in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, their subsequent release of an extended and edited two-minute video and montage, and their ultimate arrest and trial for committing the offense of hooliganism generated a large amount of interest both within Russia and on an international scale. Western accounts and analyses were marked by their tendency to frame the actions of the group in terms of what they assumed was the group's implicit political message, which they identified as Russian oppression. In the United States, for example, Pussy Riot was seen as a critique of Putin and his administration's problematic position with regard to protecting human rights (Herszenhorn, 2012). Since Pussy Riot was charged and found guilty as a result of their activism, they were hailed as martyrs who sacrificed their personal lives for altruistic political purposes.

This perspective is still regnant three years after the members of the group were tried, served their sentences, and were eventually released. Just recently, they have been feted in the United States by the likes of Madonna, Stephen Colbert, Amnesty International,

and even appeared in a cameo on the hit television show *House of Cards* (“An Award and More Support for Pussy Riot,” n.d.). However, Pussy Riot was not hailed as a champion of women’s rights or political freedom by anyone in Russia. Attitudes towards the group varied significantly between subsets of the Russian population, and there was disagreement amongst discourses of activists with regard to the value of the “Punk Prayer.” Thus, no consensus emerged with regard to the symbolic significance of spatial transgressions of religious space represented in the video. Given that protest movements were ostensibly connected by their opposition to the government and their support of freedom for the members of Pussy Riot, why was there such ambiguity surrounding the issue of how to assess their activism?

Previous explanations attest to central issues that account for the ambiguity that surrounds the discourse of Pussy Riot’s activism. These past explanations have consequentially valorize socio-historical conditions separately from the performance itself. For instance, the notion that feminism was a source of confusion is problematic because it focuses on the spectacle of the trial, in part because of the constant rhetoric from pundits that cited the female nature of the artists, and their feminine stupidity (Bernstein, 2013). Thus, questions of feminism alone do not explain confused reactions, nor do they answer why such a range of discursive reactions were produced. The explanation that Pussy Riot contradicts conventional activist roles and use of space falls short as well. Pussy Riot’s predecessor, the Russian performance group Voina, also used music in their famous performances, and like Pussy Riot violated public areas (Kolesova, 2013). However, Voina’s message and brand of activism was clear to everyone, which indicates there is still much to be explored about Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer.”

To fill this gap in scholarship, my argument looks to address the reactions and uneasiness Pussy Riot elicited with a focus on the performance itself, rather than the trial. Thus, my subsequent literature review will outline Foucauldian notions of subjectivity and visibility, which constitute a powerful heuristic tool for situating Pussy Riot’s activism within a context of their own making. My hypotheses locates the source of anxiety outside of the discursive and rhetorical structures through which the ambiguity is manifested, and hence offers a distinct and unexplored vantage point from which to research the discomfort Pussy Riot created.

I argue that this confusion derives from the fact that the techniques used by Pussy Riot for activist means are uncomfortably similar to techniques of surveillance deployed by the Russian regime they attempt to mock. Specifically, Pussy Riot’s video mirrors Soviet methods of surveillance by altering the structure of viewership. The “Punk Prayer” video put on YouTube was created by a small group of Pussy Riot’s members, but its position online gave everyone in the world access. The performance was nothing short of a spectacle, in part because of the emphasis the video placed on the clash between the women and security guards on site. The actions of the band traditionally would only be accessible to those physically present, but instead became a highly publicized scandal. The overall uncertainty the video created derives from a profound socio-spatial anxiety that was triggered by the Pussy Riot performances but was never examined as a result of the way the Pussy Riot case was consistently constructed discursively through an idealized and oversimplified historical narrative of individual resistance to tyrannical governance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### PAST DISCOURSE

The techniques Pussy Riot used in their “Punk Prayer” consequentially harken back to surveillance techniques used by the Soviet and Russian government. My literature review begins with an analysis of past scholarship on the words of the “Punk Prayer” in order to situate the chant and establish the presence of discursive and uneasy reactions. This is followed by an explanation of the speech transgressions that occur within the religious framework of prayer. I explain how this speech act and video implicitly resemble similar practices by the Russian government, with an analysis of both spectacle and surveillance.

Reactions to the lyrics of the “Punk Prayer” vary between the West and Russia, and scholars disagree on which elements of the lyrics are most important. This response is not particularly surprising given the range of political and social topics Pussy Riot includes in the lyrics of their chant. Scholarship is categorized by how an examination of the lyrics is read as auxiliary to sociopolitical critique, with either a religious, feminist, or political focus. While this body of work draws valid conclusions, selective reading for predetermined connections misses a fundamental unconscious dimension that connects the video to spatial anxiety.

Pussy Riot’s influence as religious activists was debated in a range of news forums and articles (Lipman, 2012). Many felt the group violated Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code, which prevents citizens from criticizing religious elements (Töpfer, 2014). The women chant about the church with the words “duty free,” a reference to a suspected tax scam run by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (Tayler, 2012). While the church denied any illegal activity, several Russian newspapers, including the *Moscow Times* reported that tax dollars were siphoned through duty-free cigarettes (“Russia Church in Gold Watch Row,” 2012). The chief church Metropolitan behind the scheme was “Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia;” referenced in the “Punk Prayer” as “Patriarch Gundyay [Patriarch Krill who] believes in Putin” (Vel’ko, 2009).

Even during the communist era, when the connection between church and state was hostile (as when the Bolsheviks murdered religious leaders and destroyed churches to make room for Soviet monuments) several high-ranking church officials, including Vladimir Gundyayev (the future Patriarch Kirill), continued to benefit from a series of government connections. The “Punk Prayer” implies as much with its reference to “rotten leaders” which alludes to Church corruption (Tayler, 2012). Many considered such references a way for the chant to reference Russia’s tsarist past when the church and the monarchy were inseparable (Petrenko, 2009). This connection was lost during the communist era of the 1920s, when the Church’s authority in Soviet Union significantly waned. While many church officials had reached positions of high social and political power, the country quickly shifted to Marxist ideas that labeled religion as “the opiate of the people” (Curtis, 1996).

However, the “Punk Prayer” lyrics were not universally recognized as a religious statement. Motivated by the phrase of the “Punk Prayer” that pleads “Virgin birth-giver of God, become a feminist,” many considered the lyrics to be decrying attitudes towards women in Russia. Journalists articulate this as a propagation of “an aggressive philosophy of feminism in a country where the word ‘feminist’ carries a foul, overtly Western connotation” (Tayler, 2012). This feminist reading was especially popular in the West, where

almost all scholarship and media labeled Pussy Riot “feminists,” in part because of the group’s female base, as well as self-projected feminist message (“Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom,” 2013). The harsh lyrics were thus viewed as contemporary iteration of earlier groups’ messages such as 1990s riot grrrl bands including Bikini Kill, which preceded Pussy Riot in a shared ideological genealogy of progressive activism that endeavored to establish new paradigms of action for women of Russia (Seal, 2013).

Russian feminism has experienced a similarly fragmented history. During the feminist movement in Russia in the late 1970s, citizens viewed notions of feminism as either a positive means of female liberation or a radical consequence of the West and the United States. These conflicting interpretations both divided the population by age and gender lines and blurred the definition of the word “feminist” long before Pussy Riot sang their chant (Sperling, 1999). A second wave of the feminist movement that took place in the 1990s in Russia was similarly discursive in nature. Led by Maria Arbatova and professional women’s groups, the movement primarily advocated for women in the workplace. However, as the effort progressed, feminist groups shifted to a range of non-governmental organizations, and lacked cohesive ideological goals (Zdravomyslova, 2002).

Finally, many assumed Pussy Riot’s goal was primarily political (Richardson, 2012). Despite the fact that the Russian court denied the group’s political intentions and labeled their violation “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” the chant constantly reiterates the need to “drive away Putin” (Tayler, 2012). Anya Bernstein qualifies Pussy Riot’s video as political protest cleverly disguised as a mere religious movement. She argues that the political context of similar protest movements in Russia combined with direct references to Putin indicates that the group was attempting to make a political statement. Later attempts by the Russian government to implicate the group as dissidents of the Church were simply a means to discredit Pussy Riot and their role as serious activists. She describes how Pussy Riot’s bodies become political objects and elements of protest (Bernstein, 2013). Carol Rumen expands this assumption of political relevance in her identification of the “Punk Prayer” lyrics as “pure protest poetry” in her analysis for the *Guardian* (Rumen, 2012). Like traditional martyrs in Russian history from Pushkin to Dostoevsky, who used poetry and stories to criticize an oppressive governmental regimen, the “Punk Prayer” uses the lyrics of a song.

While all these analytical positions have merit with regards to the surface meaning of Pussy Riot’s chant, none consider the implicit message of the lyrics, and why a group of unknown women caused such anxiety in Russia. Bernstein perhaps comes the closest to explaining why Pussy Riot’s video created so much anxiety with her explanation of the discomfort associated with the women’s bodies becoming political objects, yet her ideas fail to explain the discursive nature of reactions (Bernstein, 2013). Specifically, she argues that even among Pussy Riot’s supporters, the group “did not escape a routinized sexualized gaze, as when one commenter indicated that he preferred their good looks to their masked political personae” (Bernstein, 2013). While this explanation helps account for the unease caused by the women’s actions, it does not explain the range of reactions the group evoked. Similarly, it does not explain why Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” raised such attention in Russia, while other more sexualized protests did not garner this response

I argue that the lyrics and video of the “Punk Prayer” reveal an implicit socio-linguistic context wherein conventional boundaries separating private and public are transgressed to the extent that this transgression mirrors strategies of surveillance deployed by the Russian government and is thus the source of anxiety generated by its public release. To begin to demonstrate the consistency of this level of signification in the lyrics, it is worth noting that the socio-linguistic associations of the group’s name, “Pussy Riot,” has not been deeply considered by scholars, although some have noted the implications of using an English sobriquet. The use of English made the song more accessible to those in the West and of an English-speaking background. Most in Russia were not aware of the word’s meaning, and news sources in Russia that published on the group generally transcribed the name of the group into Cyrillic without providing an actual translation (“ДНИ.РУ / У Мадонны проблемы с головой после падения,” 2015).

Most relevant is the connection between the word “Pussy,” and Russian Mat lexicon, a network of forbidden sexual words that has roots dating to the Middle Ages. The Russian equivalent of “pussy” is one of four base words that evolved into the rich and imaginative jargon used to refer to sexual acts and violence. Scholars have traced the government’s attempt to control and censor the deployment of Mat language; Victor Erofeyev observes that Mat was the “Gulag of Russian linguistics—a vast and complicated network that all Russians knew about but no one publicly acknowledged” (Erofeyev, 2003). In the Russian Gulag, Mat came to denote transgressions of positions of allegiance, either toward the prisoners or the guards; “Pussy Riot’s” appropriation of the Mat word implicitly highlights its transgressive positionality (Smith, 1998). However, the origins of Mat are not always clear. Erofeyev notes that Mat also developed among nobility and the upper class, and was viewed as a fashionable trend (Erofeyev, 2003). Considered alongside what appears to be a deliberate transgression of other rhetorical and linguistic expectations inherent to conventional Russian usage, the lyrics of the song the “Punk Prayer” combined with the Mat title help account for the ambivalent and unclear reception of the video.

This anxiety and discomfort of this Mat language stems in part from the idea that Mat is a language not of petty criminals, but instead of government traitors and revolutionists. Traditional Russian authors from Pushkin to Chekov employed Mat words, often with the goal of criticizing government policies. This was evidenced in Pushkin poem “Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters,” which decries censorship and details a tale of a lurid sexual nature that subtly humiliated the tsarist regime (Remnick, 2014). Similar to the reactions to the “Punk Prayer,” critics attempted to remove the political message of Pushkin’s work by citing the use of Mat language as mere immaturity. The literary roots of Mat words as a means of dissent meant that during the Soviet era, standard Russian “became part of the accoutrement of the loyal worker [and] a sign of social conformity” (Kovalev, 2014). Thus, the implications of the name “Pussy” as well as the linguistic implications and rhetorical patterns within the “Punk Prayer” lyrics all point to transgression of conventional boundaries that warrant further explanation.

#### **SPATIAL AND LINGUISTIC TRANSGRESSIONS**

As evidenced by the historical background outlined above, the use of the word “pussy” is not appropriate in Russian public space. During the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, public

space became entrenched in political ideologies and power struggles. Jürgen Habermas insists that these spectacles in public space have traditionally reflected a fluctuation between dissent and reaction. Unlike many countries in Western Europe, the majority of the Soviet populace disagreed with elites and the government (Deibert, 2010). The constant dichotomy between the general population and government insiders has been longstanding within Russian culture, particularly with regard to policies about freedom of expression or journalistic integrity. Not only is the use of the word “pussy” not acceptable in everyday Russian public space, it is even more forbidden within a religious setting; yet the “Punk Prayer” beseeches both God and the Virgin Mary, and is performed in a church. Religious speech and prayer abide by a unique set of linguistic and social rules that scholars have analyzed in a range of different contexts. Prayer varies from normal speech, as it “challenges ordinary habits as well as the theoretical models of speech that are predicated on them” (Keane, 1997, p. 50). Linguistic theorists argue that this variety and flexibility of prayer means that ideas and phrases are implied but not directly referenced. This creates a speech pattern where “perceptions of words come from sources beyond the present context, diminishing the apparent role of the speaker’s volitional agency” (Keane, 1997).

Thus, the rhetorical structure of prayer means the speech patterns often convey a message that is unrecognized by the speaker because of emotional ambiguity. Ethnographic studies on a range of prayer patterns reveal that at times the “tongue says one thing, but the mind thinks another” (Kharkhordin, 1999). Research on Zuni prayer in the Southern United States indicates that human deference is often the source of this incongruence, which is intensified by the individual’s private and personal relationship towards God. Oleg Kharkhordin contextualizes this latent content of prayer with the example of self-condemnation and marked code switching that reveals an un-articulated step towards self-perfection (Kharkhordin, 1999). Often un-articulated elements come at moments of stress, when subjects “find themselves saying things they have not consciously meant” (Bennett, 2011). This indicates the hazy and fluid nature of religious speech, and prayer’s flexible implication for both God and the speaker.

The underlying message of the “Punk Prayer” video is similarly hazy, but it is clear that the women’s use of prayer transgressed and re-shaped the boundaries of protest and religious expression in Russia with their violation of a traditionally private and sacred act. While a range of elements that include “topic, context, age, generation, sex, kinship, dialect, group membership, political authority, and emotional solidarity” can influence linguistic decisions, public and private context is crucial (Friedrich, 1972, p. 271). The church setting Pussy Riot used to film the “Punk Prayer” was an appropriate space for religious speech, but the visible and flamboyant nature of the video as well as the public forum of YouTube is in violation of church customs. Prayer in the Russian Orthodox Church is secluded and personal, and employs language choices that show a close emotional connection with God (Bennett, 2011). Scholarship describes the church in Russia as an “experience of compulsory privacy” marked by individualism (Agadjanian, 2006). Similarly, the act of prayer may take place anywhere within the public space of the church, but is usually a solo activity, with church attendees waiting their turn to individually approach an icon or light a candle. In contrast, the “Punk Prayer” improperly moved into the public sphere, despite how rhetorical elements of the lyrics indicate a private setting.



This transgression of privacy takes place within the rhetorical structure of the “Punk Prayer” lyrics. The women sing the phrase “Patriarch Gundyay,” a reference to Patriarch Krill of Moscow. Not only does the group neglect to use the patriarch’s Church title, they refer to him as “Gundyay” rather than his actual name “Gundyayev.” This decision was considered a “harmless... nickname” by previous scholars, yet it indicates a disregard for a complex set of colloquial linguistic rules (Rumen, 2012). Colloquial language choice in Russian is defined as any element of speech that varies from traditional and standard formats. Specifically, the use of “Gundyay” not “Gundyayev” is an example of a segment deletion, and is a common means to represent familiarity in Russian culture. Segment deletion occurs in everyday speech, such as when the greeting “zdravstvujte” (здравствуйте) is shortened to “zdravst” (здравст) among friends in a private setting (Yokoyama, 1994). Similarly, this occurs with deletions in personal names, such as the transition from “Masha” to “Mash.” A short name may be used in the context of a home, yet in public discourse only a full name is used. Pussy Riot crossed this boundary and created an inappropriate sense of pseudo-connection assumed to exist between the Church head and the Russian population with their reference to “Patriarch Gundyay.”

Marked linguistic decisions that indicate a transgression of privacy were not limited to one phrase of the “Punk Prayer.” The group also relied on repetition to convey a sense of informality unconventional in modern Russian. Scholars who deconstructed the group’s lyrics do not analyze the repetition of the words “Drive away Putin” and “Become a Feminist,” perhaps because of differences in Russian and English structure. Repetition as a means to convey a private and familiar setting is seen in a range of Russian speech. Olga Yokoyama cites the Russian folk tale “Shepherds, shepherds, whose flock you herd,” as an intensification of informal discourse meant to convey private advice and closeness (Yokoyama, 1994). Historically the tale was passed down through generations and was exchanged between two people in an isolated setting. Literary critic Ewa Thompson also explores the idea of repetition in her work on Pushkin. She states that his poems “consist of a repetition that would not occur in everyday economical language.” This rhetorical strategy produces a sense of relaxation and informality (Thompson, 1971, p. 127). While repetition in Russian may be used simply to drive home a point, it also implies a “grammar of closeness” that Pussy Riot should not have had access to. Pussy Riot did not know their audience, yet they conveyed familiarity with their lyrics. This assumption of informality is unconventional in an often formal Russian society, and ultimately created an underlying anxiety and sense of discomfort among viewers.

### **SPECTACLE AND THE “PUNK PRAYER”**

The “Punk Prayer” video transgresses privacy boundaries, which were displayed to the public when it became an Internet spectacle. If Foucauldian discipline is constructed through self-agency and contemplation about self-disclosure, the video subtly influences expression and perception. The uneasiness that the video elicits derives from the embedded, implicit nature of surveillance activity within the film. By altering how the Russian population perceives and expresses itself, the “Punk Prayer” video mimics the very methods of surveillance it so adamantly criticizes. This form of spectacle creates anxiety because the tendency to assert ideological control with the use of a spectacle was a strong element of both Soviet and Russian surveillance, and carries associations redolent of expressive oppres-

sion. Helped by the shock value of their footage, the “Punk Prayer” video was a YouTube spectacle that garnered millions of views around the world. Theorists define the spectacle as a performance or environment that “renders a small number of objects accessible to the inspection of a multitude of men” (Dirks, 1994, p. 150). While the party that consumes the spectacle has the power of choice about what they experience, many place the producer as the ultimate bearer of power. Spectacle serves as an endless lure to our attention, and shapes perceptions of reality through a unique and creative interpretation (Gross, 2003).

The power of spectacle has been recognized and deployed by the modern state. By shifting people’s gaze in a particular direction, spectacle serves to expand the public sphere and expose lives and ideas that were previously private. Historians and political scientists have long studied how these state-regulated institutions and spaces have been crucial for the development of a collective identity (Bennett, 2011). Bruce D’Arcus argues that spectacles within public space fueled the Civil Rights Movement in the United States by serving as a symbolic marker of spatial access (D’Arcus, 2003). Protests in southern states were dramatic and highly visible in public locations, which conveyed a sense of the ongoing political struggle. Manfredo Tafuri contextualizes this political focus in his statement that “the spectacle demands of the audience not a few pennies and the pleasant wasting of several hours but the life-long commitment to the institution that staged the show” (Dirks, 1994, p. 514). This “show” can include demonstrations and performances, or more subtle forms of exhibition such as museums or parks. Currently, the scope of the spectacle extends to the Internet.

## SURVEILLANCE

The idea that Internet use fomented an internalized positionality defined by obedience is relevant to the assessment of the Internet within the context of social and political realities, not as the zone of unlimited freedom through which many interpreted the “Punk Prayer.” Media expert Julien Nocetti argues that the government’s regulation of media contributed to the de-intellectualization of the Soviet community. Through the regulation of media, the Soviet government was able to control the sphere and range of public thought to approved boundaries during the 1970s and 1980s, which produced a singular narrative that curtailed self-expression of both media producers and consumers (Nocetti, 2011). The presence of the government was visually evident in constant arrests in public spaces by police officers, which was symbolized through the secret police as a means to maintain control. The Cheka, which was later called the KGB, became the “primary weapon for the consolidation and maintenance of state power” (Whitaker, 1999, p. 21).

However, this came with appalling human costs. Journalists who published stories against the Soviet regime faced forced labor camps, political exile, and death, which led to self-censorship on the part of newspaper, television, and even sitcoms to government-approved expression (Piacentini, 2006). The 1930s were marked by brutal show trials that were motivated in part by growing paranoia among the population. These trials created fear among the populace and helped create a sense of obligation to the party government (Hodos, 1987).

However, instead of print media or trials, the “Punk Prayer” incited compliance through the Internet and YouTube. The space of YouTube, a main vehicle for transmission and access to information for Russian citizens since the early 2000s, is integral to music,

interpersonal relations, and entertainment. While the government does not block sites, all materials move through a central portal called RUNET (Nocetti, 2011). This term refers to the Russian language Internet sphere, which is monitored by the Russian government through secondary and tertiary surveillance. Frank Bannister blames regulatory technology such as RUNET for breeches in personal expression and freedom. He states that “advances in technology and changes in the way that we communicate and store information have steadily increased the vulnerability of informational privacy” (Bannister, 2005, p. 65).

Lead by Rafal Rohozinski, scholars have branded these Russian methods of regulation that lead to this obedience “creeping authoritarianism” (Deibert, 2011). Unlike the Chinese, the Russian government does not block Facebook or other social media websites, but instead monitors content from afar. Rohozinski argues that this creates a subliminal form of control, as the government’s presence is not obvious in everyday Internet use. This constructs the appearance of a more nuanced community, as it is common to forget that surveillance regulates and controls actions when it occurs on an unconscious level (Deibert, 2011). A crucial shift in surveillance methods is reflected in the less invasive form used today, as panoptic surveillance is gradually replaced by less visible means of effecting control. William Bogard’s observation is telling: “Surveillance, we are told, is discreet, unobtrusive, camouflaged, unverifiable—all elements of artifice designed into an architectural arrangement of spaces to produce real effects of discipline. Eventually this will lead, by its means of perfection, to the elimination of the Panopticon itself” (Bogard, 1996, pg.\_\_).

In modern Russia and in the YouTube “Punk Prayer” video, there is no visible Soviet style Panopticon to watch over citizens. However, as both Bogard and Hall Roberts emphasize, even if we do not consciously realize surveillance methods, this does not indicate their lack of power (Roberts, n.d.). Subtle surveillance engenders the formation of different identities through the Internet and impacts how consumers view both the Russian government and the “Punk Prayer.” Although imagined communities constructed via the Internet share ideological characteristics with those constructed by print media, scholars often view communities of the Internet to be informed by notions of liberation as opposed primarily to notions of nationalism. This sense of liberation is attributed to the assumption that Internet users have a choice of what they view and consume. However, the very parameters of choice are in fact implicitly contained by those who choose to post information, which contains liberation (Robins, 1995). Deployment of technology to create and distribute a video must be seen as aligned with a form of scrutiny that reflects the operation of disciplinary power. Pussy Riot’s video is no exception to this statement, but is instead haunted by the ghost of a panoptic society where surveillance generates self-censorship.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My literature review has explored and analyzed the discourse of the two-minute “Punk Prayer” video. This analysis has focused primarily on the religious setting of the “Punk Prayer” and prayer as a form of expression, and how traditional rules were violated when Pussy Riot made their video public. Prayer in the Russian Orthodox Church is a private and contained event, and is distinctly personal, which I have outlined through a series of linguistic transgressions in the song’s lyrics. My subsequent analysis will continue to explore findings from in-person interviews, as well as an analysis of blog posts and com-

ments. Secondly, I will examine the composition of the “Punk Prayer” video, including the framing of the film and the women’s fashion decisions.

In the first component of my primary analysis, I gained insight into the “Punk Prayer” through a series of interviews. To inform my knowledge of the role of music videos and Internet social media in modern Russian culture, I conducted oral interviews with 10 Russians from the age of 18 to 25. Interviews took place in Kazan, a city located east of Moscow, during the summer of 2014. While I was attending class at the Institute of Economics, Management and Law in Kazan, I was able to meet with Russian students of the appropriate age group. Interviews were structured very informally, and started with the question: “Why do you watch music videos online?” and “What attracts you to specific videos?” If these questions did not lead to the subject of activism and protest movements, I asked if they liked videos with a secondary message and eventually brought up the topic of the “Punk Prayer” video. This allowed me to initially avoid the potentially sensitive and controversial issue of Pussy Riot, but still gave me access to information about how Russians perceive and interpret the intersection of the Internet, music, and power relations.

I did not bring up the Pussy Riot video during the majority of my interviews, in part because of the complex nature of my research question, as well as the controversial and political nature of the group. Several students discussed the topic of the “Punk Prayer” outside of a formal interview setting, which I included in my analysis. However, the majority of the subject pool discussed other bands, Internet forums, and media trends outside of protest movements. Because of this limitation, my ethnographic data revealed little about the specific role of surveillance and power in the “Punk Prayer” video, but instead provided general information about Russian attitudes towards the group.

The second component of my examination will include analysis of discourse surrounding the “Punk Prayer.” After the production of the video, Russian-based blogs created posts about the group’s video and subsequent comments responded to such analysis. The discourse used in these blog posts will form the basis of my primary research. Unlike YouTube comments, blog posts and their interpretations are less likely to be deleted and can be easily searched by time and location. Using search fields to limit responses, I located comments originating from Russia that occurred most recently after the video was posted, during the start of the trial, and after the women were eventually released from prison. With two posts in each category, I deconstruct language and references using similar discursive strategies I employed for the lyrics of the “Punk Prayer.” This analysis will focus on the terms “fool” and “hooligan” and the ways these terms both explicitly and implicitly reveal trends in underlying anxiety created by the posting and content of the video and how this reflects on a historical and political context.

My secondary analysis will focus on the implications of the “Punk Prayer” video footage, and then will shift to an analysis of the video techniques used. Pussy Riot took time to construct their video to appeal to viewers and create a unique image. I analyze the implications of these strategic film edits as well as the similarities between historical montage in the Soviet Union and Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer.” Montage is not a new element to Russian film, as David Bordwell has shown in his analysis of Soviet cinematography. Soviet cinematographic techniques are characterized by juxtaposition and narratives throughout that were intended as a metaphorical commentary (Bordwell, 1997). Many Soviet-era films

were montages, which allowed producers to build their own narrative outside of the direct footage as well as make up for a lack of raw film. This construction of a narrative is seen in the underlying composition of the “Punk Prayer” video, which also included little raw footage.

Finally, I mirror the strategies Norman Fairclough uses in his analysis of power relations to further examine the lyrics of the “Punk Prayer” (Fairclough, 1995). My focus will be on both youth and members of the public involved in the political sphere and how the definition of words shifts between these subsets of the Russian population. I am predominantly interested in the historical context of words and the rhetorical connections with Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the site of Pussy Riot’s video. This is particularly important given the political associations of the church as well as its prominent role in Russian history. My work will also compare Pussy Riot’s lyrics to those found in the songs of their predecessor protest movement, the group Voina, as well as the Ukrainian group Femen (“Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom,” 2013). Voina and Femen are not primarily musical groups, but instead rely on vandalism, street protests, demonstrations, and impromptu performances. Voina became well known in Russia for their political stab at Medvedev in the song “*Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear*,” which took place during the elections of 2008. This politically charged activism through spectacle served as a model for the women of Pussy Riot (Kolesova, 2013). Given that Pussy Riot looked up to Voina and mimicked their style of activism, methods used by both Voina and Femen will provide an ideological context for understanding the tension of the “Punk Prayer.”

## **RESPONSES TO PUSSY RIOT’S “PUNK PRAYER”**

### **INTERVIEW EVIDENCE**

Interviews with Russian students revealed that notions of national identity shape interpretations of YouTube as a form of protest. As most students described, people do not usually imitate the styles and dress they see in videos, particularly for videos with Russian origins. One student “Maria” described that she did not usually listen to any music videos online and that she did not think it was as common to copy or create a music video with some form of secondary message. The meaning behind songs was not something any student cited as important; instead, students preferred funny videos or songs they could replicate in popular karaoke bars. Similarly, “Katya” noted, “We usually don’t actually watch the music videos, like I assume you do in the United States. We don’t play the clips at all usually, but instead listen to music on CDs. The Internet isn’t used as much as in the United States.”

Beyond attitudes towards Russian-based YouTube videos, my interviews with students also indicate underlying trends with regards to Pussy Riot’s video as a spectacle. When I brought up the topic of Pussy Riot, students generally felt that the group’s video was an attempt by the women to show off or get attention. A student from Moscow State University described to me that he/she doesn’t “understand why Pussy Riot is such a big deal in the United States. In Russia we think they are kind of crazy. They are crazy girls that wanted to get a bunch of attention, but they don’t really mean anything to Russia as a country.” References to Pussy Riot as “crazy” was a sentiment echoed by other students, who all categorized the video and the women who participated as foolish and ineffective.

## NOTIONS OF HOOLIGANS AND FOOLS

Similar ideas were referenced in the Russian blogosphere. However, despite the discursive range of opinions across blog sites and by pundits, the majority of posts persistently mention the key words of both hooliganism and foolishness in reference to the video. This occurs both explicitly and implicitly and warrants further examination through discourse analysis. Blogs provide a moderately unregulated forum in Russia in which to search through time and topic. The original YouTube video of the “Punk Prayer” was disabled shortly before the start of the trial, making YouTube comments impossible to trace. Blogs in Russia have been labeled by media scholarship as a “substitute for public space” and a “paradoxical mixture of public and the private” (Gorny, n.d., p. 10). Despite the informal nature of blogs in Russia, they have the ability to convey attitudes of social change. The historical background and rhetorical development in Russian of these two terms indicates further links between Pussy Riot’s video and the surveillance methods of the Soviet government and helps to explain the discomfort seen in people’s reactions to the video. Thus, I will describe the historical and Soviet implications of the words “hooligan” and “fool” and explore the subsequent definitions of such words within the context of a selection of blog posts and comments.

Hooliganism within Russia has been primarily defined within a cultural setting and therefore the requirements for the label have shifted throughout history. The term has encompassed religious crimes such as markedly “disrespectful” acts that included “chopping up icons for firewood to heat tea” (Neuberger, 1993, p. 151). Hooligans were often children or poor workers on the streets and were known for terrorizing the general population (Fitzpatrick, 1999). Throughout Soviet history, government officials deported 19,000 individuals who they labeled as a possessing a hooligan element. Anger towards the government and open hostility towards Soviet ideals is generally considered the impetus for this violence. Thus, hooliganism was often feared in the government because it was considered a way to disrupt the peace (Fitzpatrick, 1999).

While hooliganism as a crime in Russia was first used to refer to people who defied the government regime, it was also used to reference vigilante groups partially supported by the communist government. Scholars argue that the Soviet government understood the power of hooligan groups and used their power for government ideologies. These activists were generally youth and “saw themselves as a vanguard” (Fitzpatrick, 1999). Such youth activists were employed when a disturbance was necessary or as a means to distract the population from other events. Similarly, even hooligans who were not directly involved with the Soviet government typically focused their violence towards civilians, not policemen or government officials. As Vladimir Kozlov notes, “hooligan gangs for a long time showed relative loyalty to authorities,” and only targeted officials if they were direct obstacles (Kozlov, 2002, p. 31). Thus, the origins of hooliganism carry a discursive mix of definitions as both useful and harmful protest for governmental means.

This tendency of bloggers to cite the women with discursive words was not isolated. The women of Pussy Riot were referenced as “fools” by multiple blog posters and pundits. The word *dyrak* (дырак) has implications that carry historical and religious significance in Russian culture. The “fool,” can reference the holy fool, who traveled across Russia advocating for the virtues of the Orthodox Church through humor and attention-seeking

measures. The fool was considered to be clever and was “eccentric in clothing, speech, and behavior” (Klots, n.d., p. 2). While the primary role of the church was to fight atheism, fools were noted for their childish nature and their ability to perform both harmless pranks and serious troublemaking, particularly in Russian folklore.

However, beyond the wild appearance and role of the fool, the word also carries notions of power. By referencing Pussy Riot as “fools,” pundits convey similar ideas of cleverness. Because the fool was able to explore relations of power, it was “viewed with both fear and respect, and was an unlikely hero” (Klots, n.d., p. 2). This respect is evidenced by the reverent portrayal of the fool throughout Russian literature (Wigzell, 1988). Part of the fool’s power derives from his ability to mix within social groups and create both a sense of pride and respect among the community through humor. References to the concept of the fool persisted into the time of the Soviet Union when the fool was used as a subtle means to criticize Western traditions. This evolved during a campaign of patriotism during the 1930s that was marked, among other things, by a desire to embrace traditional Russian mediums such as folklore (Klots, n.d.).

## **BLOG POST ANALYSIS**

The majority of blog posts selected for my analysis are from the Russian blog web portal “Grani.” The blog forum was founded in December of 2000 and is a leading blog of political thought in Russia. It gathers work from professional journalists and influential pundits within Russia, as well as public opinions, and allows for highly utilized comment sections. In part because of the blog’s tendency to discuss human rights questions, it recently received publicity as the target of March 2014 censorship from the Russian government. I will examine two blog posts and their range of comments from the established three time periods and will determine trends in word usage and references of notions of foolishness and hooliganism. The first time point in my analysis will be posts within two weeks of the original Pussy Riot “Punk Prayer” YouTube video posting on February 21, 2012. This will allow me to explore comments that focus on the video without interferences from official or government opinions. Next, I will focus on articles published approximately within two weeks of the start of the August 17, 2012 trial. This provides insight into government opinions and their intersection with other media forums. Finally, I will examine how blog posts and comments were shaped after Pussy Riot’s December 23, 2013 release from prison. This period allows for an exploration of public reactions to Pussy Riot’s sanctions as well as popular opinions towards the group.

Comments and blog posts around the time of February 21, 2012 are noted by their harsh references towards the women, despite the fact that no government rhetoric was released about the video. One of the blog posters stated: “So the other day Alexei Navalny hastened to disown [Pussy Riot] and calls the girls hooligan and fools” (Adomanis, 2012). Such a comment is indicative of the harsh connotations associated with both words, which is supported by comments in his article that describe the women’s prank as a “disgrace,” and replete with “disrespect.” The women’s action and video were summarized as a foolish farce and bloggers and commenters did not acknowledge any redeeming or intellectual qualities of the video. Secondly, the comments from the time of the video’s release focused primarily on the religious nature of the women’s actions and the ways in which the act of



filming was sacrilegious. The focus on religious blasphemy motivated commenters to heavily criticize the women's actions and label their spectacle a crime. One commenter even stated that the population should "crucify them" as punishment for their religious disobedience ("Грани.Ру | Артур Аристакисян: Плоть и кровь Pussy Riot," 2012).

Perhaps because of such religious implications, the blog posts and comments emphasized the negative aspects of the women's depiction as hooligans. One pundit wrote, "the girls are talented and beautiful, but Putin and Medvedev are boring and mediocre. The people in this sense cannot be fooled" ("Грани.Ру | Артур Аристакисян: Плоть и кровь Pussy Riot," 2012). While this may seem like a compliment, by focusing on the beauty of the women, the commenter ignores the political power of the "Punk Prayer" and instead labels the public as foolish for paying attention to Pussy Riot's actions.

During the start of the trial during August of 2012, blog-post comments and notions of hooliganism and foolishness were shaped heavily by the intersection between the Russian government's rhetoric and opinions in the West about the pervasiveness of Pussy Riot's video. One article states that the trial was an example of "fools as fools." Other commenters mentioned that the foolish nature of the women of the "Punk Prayer" was a consequence of attitudes in the United States that made ideas of human rights and activism wrongly acceptable ("Грани.Ру: Две участницы Pussy Riot покинули Россию," 2012). However, despite the generally negative tone of comments and ideas expressed, the women were also characterized by bloggers as clever and enduring, providing a sharp contrast to much more critical comments earlier in the year ("Грани.Ру: МИД: Запад забыл о нормах морали," 2012).

This idea of foolishness and that Pussy Riot should be punished as fools relates to traditional notions of the fool referenced throughout Russian literature. This similarity is most evident in the comparison between Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" and scholarship that describes elements of Russian folklore and Ivan the fool. Ivan is characterized by his childish sense of fun, as well as his constant pranks and buffoonery. However, while he is able and capable of harmless pranks, he also works to serve the church with his fight against atheism (Wigzell, 1988). Unlike previous observations, this comparison represents a shift from comments that focused on Pussy Riot's role as silly women in the protest act to comments framing them as valid protesters with credibility and a defined political message. However, this increased support for Pussy Riot's actions did not endure after the trial.

Comments from December 23, 2013 focused on more theoretical concepts than the discourse of the fool and the "crimes" Pussy Riot committed. Notably, the women are compared in a post to writer and historical Russian dissenter Anton Chekhov ("Грани.Ру: По капле и есть по капле," 2013). This indicates that popular opinion had shifted from notions of the women as stupid and foolish with their prank to the prank holding a higher intellectual capacity. Posts from after the arrest also reference the United States as a country of fools. This idea was based on the notion that because rhetoric focused on human rights and elevated the status of Pussy Riot, the West did not fully consider the severity of the crimes committed.

This human rights focus and comparison to Chekhov indicates the strong political nature of Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer." However, Pussy Riot, like Chekhov, are both shaped within the framework of Soviet governmental regulations. Scholars who describe



the political nature of Chekhov and the pseudo-political messages his stories portray mirror this attitude. In the case of the short novel *Volodia*, a young boy is portrayed as discovering his sexuality. While many view the novel as a political statement about the problems of prostitution in Russia, the story is limited by censorship, and thus the political message is blurred to the general population (Rayfield, 1999). Another unnamed story by Chekhov conveys a similar message of ambiguous political questions. The story describes a protagonist who works as a servant and “makes no progress with political aims” (Rayfield, 1999, p. 119). The story lacks plausibility, and once again, censorship obfuscates the intended political message (Rayfield, 1999). This blurred political nature is seen in the “Punk Prayer” and is evidenced by the ambiguity of reactions.

## DISCUSSION

Such changes in the perspective of both pundits and the population in Russia indicate the discursive nature of Pussy Riot. Not only did feminists, political protesters, and religious leaders constantly disagree about the central message of the “Punk Prayer,” the source and nature of the anxiety the video creates changes across time (“Россияне о деле Pussy Riot,” 2012). This may be due to an increase in Western rhetoric about the group and the desire of the West to inaccurately represent Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” as a specific brand of political protest. This influence is evidenced by continual and increased references to the women within the context of “America” as well as references to notions of human-rights activism. Thus, the events that contextualize the “Punk Prayer” video serve only to increase anxiety and complicate the range of discursive reactions that surround the group.

## VIDEO ANALYSIS

Beyond discourse, the structural and aesthetic qualities of the “Punk Prayer” video are indicative of Soviet-era rhetoric and methods of power. While critics may argue that the decision to film the “Punk Prayer” footage at the Church of Christ the Savior was a product of the church’s central location in Moscow, in reality the church holds significance for the government and population. During Pussy Riot’s trial, Patriarch Krill said that the women should be punished in part because of their specific decision to film in the Church of Christ the Savior. The patriarch argued that Russia owes much of its existence to the church and stated that it was constructed to commemorate Russia’s victory over Napoleon in 1812. The church was even compared to a shrine and “the patriarch argued for the national significance of the cathedral by underlying its historical context” (Robin, 2013).

## FRAMING

Beyond the decision to use the Church of Christ the Savior, the way the “Punk Prayer” used montage to create their two-minute YouTube video is reminiscent of Soviet methods of film creation. Soviet montage is typically characterized by brief shots of original footage mixed with a strong and distinct narrative (Bordwell, 1972). David Bordwell illuminates the importance of montage in Soviet films in his description of how montage was used to construct the narrative of a story (Bordwell, 1972). Often, viewers were unable to follow the exact film sequences, which were conveyed through bright lighting and a quick mix of images. While montage was often merely used to compensate for a lack of footage and

resources during the 1920s and 1930s, it was also a way to convey ideas that extended beyond the film, as well as to manipulate viewers (Bordwell, 1972). This idea of extending a narrative is particularly evident in the film “Fall of the Romanov Dynasty,” as described by Graham Roberts. Roberts explains that the film as well as other Soviet films often used montage to convey specific educational messages or ideas about the West (Roberts, 1999).

Beyond the strategic use of montage, the “Punk Prayer” uses video to convey religious ideologies. The footage is shot in a way that focuses on the church's icons throughout the video. While part of this is a product of the heavy presence of icons in Russian Orthodox churches, each edge of the “Punk Prayer” video is framed with icons of Jesus or Mary. This indicates the importance of icons for the Church and the authority of the Russian Orthodox leaders. Scholarship on the topic agrees that icons were a way for the government to instill religious ideologies after the end of the Soviet Union (Espinola, 1992). While only a small percentage of the population attended church during the 1990s, almost every home in Russia had an icon on its walls, and icons were important symbols of the power and presence of the church.

### **FASHION IN THE “PUNK PRAYER”**

The fashion choices of Pussy Riot in the video are also distinctive. Characterized by bright block layers and signature Doc Martin shoes, scholars attribute the outfit choice to Pussy Riot's desire to have their outfits repeated. Russian girls and other activists are easily able to replicate Pussy Riot's appearance through simple dresses, bright designs, and balaclavas cut out of socks. This ability to replicate the style of Pussy Riot has been seen in a range of contemporary art based on the group, which emphasizes the signature dresses and balaclavas. Similarly, protest groups have mimicked Pussy Riot's bright colors and outfits since 2012 and have subsequently caught the attention of the Russian public and police. Others cite the convenience of the outfits as a motivation for their presence in the film (“Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom,” 2013). Not only could bright tights and dresses be purchased at low costs, they also allowed the women to blend into the general population on the streets of Moscow before their church performance.

Regardless of the intentions of Pussy Riot's fashion decisions, the impact of their clothing as symbols of their video and lyrics is reminiscent of Soviet methods of fashion as a means of symbolizing ideologies. Fashion was a historical point of ideological contention during the era of the Cold War. While “frumpy women” did little to help raise support for socialist ideals, the presence of Western fashion was representative of consumerism and Western indulgence. However, this ideological paradox was addressed through a distinct and plain Soviet fashion (Reid, 2002). This symbolically simple style represented a way to distinguish the Soviet Union from the West as well as create an image of the ideal woman. While the end result of their fashion choices was different, the impacts of Pussy Riot's outfits are reminiscent of the Soviet Union through their ability to create an ideological and symbolic force among observers.

This comparison is first seen in the way the outfit choices of Pussy Riot violated religious rules. While the women covered their hair, their tight and form-fitting clothing was considered unacceptable by religious leaders who learned of the “Punk Prayer” video. Similar to this underlying statement against the institution of the Church, Soviet

fashion created subtle notions of distaste against the United States and the West. Women in the 1930s in Russia were warned that simplicity was crucial and that “too much is bad” (Paulicelli, 2009, p. 81). In many ways, the simple prints and lack of brand names emulates this distaste for the West and instead places value on notions of simplicity.

In the case of Soviet Union fashion, outfits were also used partially to convey military force of the communist regime. This primarily took place through the fashion of the communist youth group “Komsomol,” which drew distinction because of the member’s uniform of “knickers, botinki stockings, semi-military tunics, and belts” (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 35). The Komsomol served as a symbol through their distinctive outfits and were able to work outside of the direct control of the Soviet regime to activate the youth base. The Komsomol’s propaganda was targeted towards children aged fifteen and older and was meant to introduce children to Soviet ideologies and rituals. Komsomol and the fashion of the group was a symbol for Soviet-era morality and was considered to be the building block of ethical development for children (Halstead, 1994). However, the importance of the group and their distinctive nature was not possible without their signature outfits.

This fashion as well as the overall anxiety created by the “Punk Prayer” must also be considered within the context of similar protest groups. Much scholarship compares Voina’s protest efforts to Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer.” The groups are indeed similar, as Tolokonnikova was an original member of Voina and later formed the basis of the organizational structure of Pussy Riot. However, Pussy Riot’s relationship between discourse and protest is much different from Voina’s. Instead of a focus on discourse and lyrics, much of Voina’s protests involved physical acts and scenarios. During one protest, the group faked a legal execution in order to decry Russian attitudes towards gay and immigrant populations. Another more famous protest involved the group engaging in group sex in a museum in Moscow. While these protests contrast the “Punk Prayer” in their notable lack of a message through rhetoric and discourse, they have a similar shock value. However, in both cases, the central message of the protest is not immediately clear to viewers, but instead requires additional analysis.

## CONCLUSION

While they started as a motley collective with little public attention and even fewer resources, the “Punk Prayer” video launched Pussy Riot into a globally recognized brand. Pussy Riot and their infamous prank not only gained international attention; they also received interviews from coveted Western media outlets and even a photo shoot in *Vogue* magazine (Corbett, 2014). This attention has sparked widespread interest in the group and has motivated further performances, for instance one during the Sochi Olympics of 2014 (“Pussy Riot whipped at Sochi Games by Cossacks,” 2014). Despite the fact that the group claims their end goal centered on human-rights questions within Russia rather than on business antics, evidence of the power of Pussy Riot’s brand have increased since the last member was released from prison.

Pussy Riot’s members claim that they do not own their brand and are not interested in creating a business. While the group allegedly operates from small-scale donations and refuses sponsorship, one can purchase Pussy Riot t-shirts on American retail website Amazon and the group recently fought to trademark their name and image (Taylor, 2013).

This trademark would tentatively allow them to sell clothing, music devices, cosmetics, and even condoms across a range of European markets. Similarly, despite their anti-business focus, they are rumored to have been offered close to \$700 million dollars by a United States music company to complete a world tour (Taylor, 2013). While the group's lawyers have not commented to Western media sources about the future of the brand, it appears that the women behind the "Punk Prayer" are focused on preserving the group's message and profits through strategic marketing.

It seems that this strategic branding, English-language advertising, and focus on Western consumers has made members of Pussy Riot popular in the Western world and in the United States. However, this is not the case in Russia, where the majority of the country considers Pussy Riot both irresponsible and irrelevant. This lack of appeal within their home country raises questions about the validity of the protest Pussy Riot employed in their "Punk Prayer." While the words of the "Punk Prayer" may speak about Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, they remain unpopular and ignored in the country they implored to implement change. This perhaps indicates the difficult environment activists and anti-governmental groups face within Russia. Pussy Riot may have been one of the most popular protest movements outside of Russia, but they were not the only group that faced oppression and prosecution for their actions.

Regardless of their inability to effect change within Russia, Pussy Riot has undeniably obtained a high level of success and popularity outside of Russia. News media has noted that this elaborate branding and marketing campaign as reminiscent of methods used to project an image of Putin as an honest and personable politician. This process also occurred in the Soviet Union during the election of Boris Yeltsin, when TV support was used as a fundamental tool to create a public stage (Zazurskii, 2004). The ways that this public stage developed has since shifted with the expansion of the Internet, with a greater focus of media perspectives now focusing on online rhetoric. Such efforts have centered on articles and television in primarily government-run Russian media and are a common element of both print capitalism and branding within Russia.

Regardless of any connections between the branding used in Pussy Riot and Putin's strategies, critics of the "Punk Prayer" video and Pussy Riot argue that the sleek new brand defies notions of what it means to be "punk." While Pussy Riot has been censured for the poor lyrics and abrasive vocals that helped shape them as a Punk group, this label is no longer accurate and further contributes to the confusion and tension that the group creates. While the connotations of punk have shifted since the 1980s, the word itself as well as the people who identify with the word "punk" were generally associated with counter-culture movements and distaste for the business world (Bindas, 1993). However, Pussy Riot has avoided this approach, as the group now embraces a mainstream and primped image.

The "Punk Prayer" may no longer be considered punk as a consequence of the group's now polished image; however, the ambiguity I seek to explain throughout the course of my analysis remains the same: Pundits and the public alike have been unable to explain both their strong reactions to the group and the actual message the women were attempting to project. Instead, the "Punk Prayer" has been experienced in Russia by a range of interpretations and a general sense of anxiety. The actual effect of the group's activism will become clearer as the political environment in Russia shifts. However, what is clear is the

ways the video and the “Punk Prayer” mimic past methods of Soviet surveillance. Like the government they attempt to criticize, Pussy Riot’s actions and video are not always what they appear.

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