The present paper develops Robert Stam’s notion of adaptation as an embodiment of the ‘dialogic intertextuality’. Stam’s idea of adaptation as a dialogue with numerous intertexts is used in the current paper in order to analyse Karen Shakhnazarov’s considerable re-writing of Chekhov’s text. His 2009 film can be defined as an example of transposition: Shakhnazarov uses the original story in order to show life in a mental hospital near Moscow in 2007. The film illustrates Shakhnazarov’s understanding of adaptation as an act of critical reading of the source text. The paper focuses on the representation of Russian intelligentsia in the original text and in the film with the view to demonstrate how Shakhnazarov’s screen adaptation of Chekhov’s story “Ward No.6” interrogates existing models of nationhood and empire. The film suggests that the demise of Russian intelligentsia in the 1990s-2000s resulted marginalisation of Russian intellectuals who find themselves living in/within emptiness.

In my opinion, Shakhnazarov’s film contributes significantly to the long-running debate among representatives of Russian intelligentsia about resistance to evil. The film highlights negative aspects of utopian thinking and promotes Shakhnazarov’s metaphysical understanding of the psychology of personhood. It eschews contemporary scientific attempts to reduce persons to their mental lives, behaviours and biological factors. Undoubtedly, Shakhnazarov’s explicit rejection of Russian intelligentsia’s belief in universalism, progress and scientific approach to social engineering echoes Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s attack on Russian intellectuals in the 1974 essay “Smatterers” (“Obrazovanshchina”). Solzhenitsyn’s article re-evaluates the vision of Russian religious philosophers associated with the journal Landmarks (Vekhi). It views the outlook of several philosophers writing for this journal as a basis for a new approach to the role of intellectuals in Russian society. Solzhenitsyn reinvents their views in order to produce his vision of the future based on spiritual and moral values. Unlike Solzhenitsyn who sees global evil and communism as interchangeable notions, Shakhnazarov offers a compassionate approach to those who found resistance to evil difficult.

Shakhnazarov’s references to monastery life, monks and Christian symbols in his film invoke Semen Frank’s discussion of Christian Realism. In “The Light Shineth in Darkness” (“Svet vo t’me”), Semen Frank (1877-1950) writes: ‘Christian realism is the consciousness of the danger and falsity of the utopian striving to a perfect order of human and worldly being, to perfection in the plane of law; but in the Christian consciousness this realism is combined with the absolute, unlimited striving to attain the free perfection of life and relations between people, to attain the free action of the powers of love […]”. According to Frank, Christian realism is not interchangeable with passivity: it requires instead “maximal intensity of moral activity.” Frank’s article underlines the necessity to face to the reality of

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evil in the world. While explaining the inevitability in the world of a certain minimum of imperfection, Frank denounces passivity and utopianism. He is convinced that the utopian striving to a perfect order of human and social order precludes people from being active in bringing God’s spirit into society. In a similar vein, Shakhnazarov’s film contains post-utopian and melancholic overtones related to the lost opportunity of Russian intellectuals to improve Russian life with the help of spiritual and ethical values.

Shakhnazarov’s *Ward No.6* contains allusions to trauma of Russian intellectuals who believed naively in the positive aspects of the enlightenment as shaped by Stalinist utopian culture. It suggests that trauma of post-Soviet subjects cannot be fully verbalised. That is why the film uses the language of silence and allusions to some vague memories that keep haunting them. The film demonstrates how Soviet and post-Soviet representatives of Russian intelligentsia -- inspired by their predecessors who were active in the 1860s-70s -- became driven to melancholia and muteness. The film offers a few glimpses of spiritual awakening: it appears that Dr Ragin develops a mystical vision in the end of the film as he has encountered a reincarnation of a nun who founded the monastery where the psychiatric ward is presently located. It offers a sense of hope to those who is open to constructing a new identity rooted in spiritual life. It suggests that a new vision of post-utopian future should be imbued with a desire to be reconnected with Russian spiritual life.

Being an example of creative reading of Chekhov’s story, the film shifts the attention to a contemporary experience of a traumatic void caused by the historical amnesia and the destruction of memory embedded in Soviet culture. By placing Chekhov’s characters in a contemporary context, the film articulates the existence of traumatic void shaped by a different historical condition. The representation of the post-Soviet void is not new. It has been explored extensively by Russian contemporary artist Ilya Kabakov. Harriet Murav describes the duality of post-Soviet discourses on memory in these terms: “The post-Soviet narrative of the victory echoes prior Soviet language. An exhibit in the State Museum of Political History (the former Museum of the Revolution) describes the war against the Nazis as ‘unprecedented in the history of mankind’. The unprecedented war rationalizes the unprecedented suffering caused not only by the German invasion, but also by Stalin’s conduct of the war. The enormity of victory obviates the enormity of unacknowledged pain”.\(^4\) Commenting on the language of Kabakov’s paintings and installations, Murav writes: “Kabakov’s ‘alternative history’ points to the omitted middle of Soviet history. Kabakov is not a magical historicist and neither is he a naïve positivist; he does not claim to be telling a story that could not previously be told, replacing falsehood with truth, and simply filling in gaps. His images re-instate gaps. Every artwork from the Rosenthal–Kabakov–Spivak series graphically marks loss — as opposed to an alternative history that would saturate every space with meaning and in so doing create the fantasy of intactness, perfection, and completeness. The white and black spaces in Kabakov’s Rosenthal series graphically disrupt the possibility of monumentality and underscore fragmentation”.\(^5\) Likewise, the post-Soviet loss of the grand narrative is invoked in Shakhnazarov’s film through various allusions to a traumatic void. They are especially felt in conversations of the interviewees with the narrator.

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Shakhnazarov pays a special attention to the inability of Russian creative intelligentsia to heal Russian society.

It is clear that Shakhnazarov's usage of the portraits of Hemingway and Vysotsky in Ragin's flat might be seen as a critique of Russian intelligentsia's bookish mindset. It ironises the idealistic belief of Russian intellectuals in the transformative power of literature. It questions their ability to resist revolutionary changes and violence that permeates Russian everyday life. It is not a coincidence that the documentary-style of narration used in the film strongly invokes Russian New Drama promoted by Elena Gremina and Mikhail Uvarov. The aesthetic principle of this type of drama revolves around the notion of trauma caused by violence. Uvarov’s followers want to give a voice to Russian marginal groups and victims of violence affected by social order and domestic abuse. Both Gremina (in her play about Chekhov and his brothers “Brothers Che”) and Shakhnazarov (in his adaptation of Chekhov’s Ward No 6) reinterpreted Chekhov for the new audiences. They replace Soviet image of Chekhov as a strong critic of Russian autocracy by the image of Chekhov as a precursor of Russian New Drama who attempted to articulate traumatic experiences of displaced groups of people in Russia.

Shakhnazarov’s film departs radically from Chekhov’s story because it shifts its focus from social conditions to the language of trauma. The idea of immortality is not featured prominently in his film in comparison with Chekhov’s story. Alexander Burry finds the ending of the film especially striking. He writes: “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”. Burry suggests that both Chekhov and Shakhnazarov share a sceptical approach to the possibility of Russian spiritual rebirth. He explains: “The end of the film, however, with the New Year’s celebration undermined by the continuing infantilisation of the patients, casts great doubt on the possibility of religious or secular regeneration”. This view requires some modification. While Shakhnazarov does not suggest that the whole society in Russia can be spiritually reborn overnight, his film points to a possibility of developing a new vision of life by suffering individuals that could mark their spiritual awakening. It is important to remember that the story about mental patients takes place in a monastery rather than in a hospital. There are important allusions to Christian symbolism in the film, too.

I also would like to argue that Shakhnazarov’s film offers a more compassionate view of Russian intelligentsia. His portrayal of Ragin who survived the stroke displays some signs of empathy. The fact that Ragin has become mute can be seen as a symbolic portrayal of Russian intellectuals today. The state of inertia experienced by Russian intellectuals in the post-Soviet period is exemplified well in Sergey Gandlevsky’s novel Illegible. It features a contemporary critic whose life seems reduced to a trivial and routinized way of life that has


7 Burry, “A Vicious Circle”, p.137.
neither purpose nor vision in terms of social well-being. The narrator describes it thus: “So today will go according to routine, like the majority of my days: like tomorrow, like the day after tomorrow – rinse and repeat; it’s completely visible, and there is no need to try to peek into the distance”. The quote from Gandlevsky’s book shows that Shaknazarov’s criticism of Russian intelligentsia’s futile dreaming and utopian thinking is not unique. It should be better understood if we compare it to Tatyana Tolstaya’s strong attacks on Russian intelligentsia.

Tolstaya writes: “The Russian democratic intelligentsia does a good job of talking, arguing, writing, advising, appealing, dreaming, creating rosy projects, protesting and pointing to where truth and good lie. But it does not know realistically how to resolve concrete problems”. Talking from the point of view of a pragmatic thinker, Tolstaya accuses Russian intellectuals of infantilism. She goes on to say this: “When dreaminess and idealism run into the crude prose of life, the intelligentsia is shocked. In this new historical phase, one of the worst problems has become the issue of ethnic conflict and ethnic and national identity. Here again, the tendency of the intelligentsia to romanticize other groups, including foreigners and ethnic minorities, has not helped it to understand what must be faced today”. In light of Tolstaya’s explanation, Shakhnazarov’s image of the mute intellectual Ragin can be easily interpreted as an allegorical depiction of the demise of Russian intelligentsia in contemporary Russia. The portrayal of Ragin as a mute Russian intellectual suggests that Russian intelligentsia has lost its ability to lead and inspire others. Russian intellectuals became displaced in a capitalist context: they look confused and mute. The image of a displaced intellectual of the Thaw generation in Shakhnazarov’s film can be also interpreted as an allusion to contemporary memory wars.

According to Inna Kochetkova’s book on the myth of the Russian intelligentsia, one of the memory wars in the 2000s pertains to a conflict between the shestidesiatniki and semidesiatniki. She states: “The subsequent generation of intelligentsia (the semidesiatniki) have tried to silence the shestidesiatniki and what they stand for by practicing a form of intellectual cleansing”. She explains that the emergence of the new power narrative of the moral self aspires to overshadow the narrative plot of shestidesiatniki and displace their romanticism as something shameful. The set of values advocated by semidesiatniki revolves around the notions of realism and pragmatism. The latter outlook is promoted by the Nezavisimaia gazeta (Independent Newspaper) as a new image of Russian intelligentsia. Kochetkova herself is scornful of the attempt of shestidesiatniki to apply the mythologised version of their stories to their own real lives without realising that their myth of intelligentsia creates unrealistic expectations. She suggests that as a normative mode of behaviour it is not suitable for the twenty first century.

The dialogue between different centuries has been embedded in Shaknazarov’s Ward No.6, too. In his story ”Ward No.6”, Chekhov highlights the fact that the detained mental patients are kept in a hospital in a town located in the heart of Russia. The ward resembles a

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prison. In Shakhnazarov’s film the emphasis is not on the depiction of psychiatric ward as a prison. He portrays the mental institution as an embodiment of the loss of meaning in Russian contemporary society.

In Chekhov’s story the ward is located in the midst of ordinary secular space, but the society around it has chosen to ignore it. In Shakhnazarov’s film, the mental hospital is located in the former monastery. The juxtaposition of the secular and the spiritual becomes therefore more prominent in Shakhnazarov’s adaptation. It pinpoints the legacy of the spiritless existence of Soviet life that deprived people of an opportunity to develop their meaningful selves rooted in spirituality rather than in materialist notions of progress. The post-Soviet critic Kseniia Larina writes about the film thus: “Повторив вслед за Чеховым ‘Вся Россия – наш сад’, в смысле – дурдом, он перенес действие в 2007 год, смешал артистов с настоящими сумасшедшими и предрек скорую гибель российской цивилизации, обратив ее в выжженную ржавую безлюдную степь. Доктор Рагин (великолепный Владимир Ильин, давно заслуживший суперглавную роль) 2007 года несет в себе черты выброшенного из жизни интеллигента, страдающего от духовного вакуума и невозможности высказаться. Ощущение немоты – это древний катушечный магнитофон без пленки, это видеокамера, не способная воспроизводить звук, отчего местное «хом видео» смотрится как советские трескучие безмолвные хроники, снятые на восьмимиллиметровку. Жилище Рагина – типичное жилище советского кухонного «несогласного» – с портретами Хемингуэя и Высоцкого на обветшалых обоях, с неизменной водочкой в графине и нехитрой закуской, с большим количеством книг по истории и философии и бесконечными разговорами о смысле жизни. Похоже, этот Рагин имеет в биографии и проблемах с властью – то ли высланный, то ли ссыльный, его отношения с Москвой – тяжелы и безвыходны, его пребывание в некогда родном городе (а он – явный москвич) приносит ему почти физические муки. В поисках духовного общения Рагин натыкается на пациента Громова (блестящий дебют в большой роли Алексея Верткова, артиста студии Женовача, удивительно похожего на Малкольма Макдауэлла). Громов – как продукт расщепления рагинского сознания, результат раздвоения личности”.

Larina identifies Ragin as a displaced intellectual whose bookishness estranged him from himself and from others. As she puts it, he suffers from his spiritual void and his inability to express himself. In his film, as Larina rightly points out, Shakhnazarov satirises a typical Russian intellectuals (intelligent). He develops Chekhov’s sceptical view of Russian intellectuals whose utopian ideas precluded them from understanding the present life in all its complexity. “Much of Chekhov’s writing displays this opposition to utopian historicism”, concedes Tom Roberts, “challenging the positivist social and political theories prevalent in late nineteenth-century Russia”. Antonio Gramsci also had interpreted Chekhov as a political writer. In one of his letters Gramsci wrote: “Chekhov, in his way, by using forms of his time and culture, helped to eliminate the middle class, the intellectuals, the petty bourgeois who fancied themselves to be shaping Russian history and its future: these people really believed they were protagonists in who knows what kind of miraculous innovations,

and Chekhov showed them as they were—stingy windbags full of putrid gas, laughable and ridiculous”.13

Similarly, the Russian contemporary writer and critic Dmitrii Bykov finds Chekhov’s characters absurd. He writes: “All Chekhov’s heroes think that they love, suffer, and struggle for the public good, whereas in fact they are perpetrating ludicrous and vulgar stupidities, and that’s all they’re doing”.14 At the same time, Bykov thinks that, in addition to being a socialist realist, Chekhov was a precursor of twentieth-century absurdist literature. He makes some analogies between Chekhov’s absurdist representation of life in some works and post-Soviet writers who deploy postmodernist devices in order to expose the absurdity of contemporary life in Russia, including Viktor Pelevin. In Bykov’s opinion, Chekhov “was one of those who placed a terminal point and placed it with terminal clarity”. Bykov goes on to say this: “From him began the literature of the absurd, which is in essence a view of man from the superhuman point of view: The Life of Insects [Viktor Pelevin’s Zhitn’ nasekomykh—Trans.] is the title of a novel by one of Chekhov’s most talented successors”.15

Bykov suggests that post-Soviet absurdist revered Chekhov “as their forebear”. He sees V. Koshelev’s article “He Lay on the Divan and Died: Chekhov and the Culture of the Absurd” as an attempt to canonise Chekhov as an absurdist writer.16 The vision of Chekhov as a precursor of the absurdist art appeals to Shakhnazarov, too. In his interview to Larina, Shakhnazarov talks about the patients whom he observed in a mental hospital during his work on the film Ward No 6. He states that the patients who were watching an entertaining Russian television show House 2 (Dom 2) looked more normal that the participants of the show. He thinks that the absurdity and madness of contemporary life makes one question the definition of madness. He talks about his Chekhovean lenses thus “Если вот так это всё посмотреть, то получается, что, действительно, окружающий мир... […] в современном мире есть что-то такое, что, наверное, у нас вызывает ощущение, что он сошел с ума в гораздо большей степени, чем те люди, которые по определению считаются таковыми”.17

In his interview with Larina, Shakhnazarov admits that the theme of a mentally stable person who is surrounded by the absurdity and madness in his everyday life is one of the most important themes in his films. He says that Miloš Forman’s 1975 film Somebody Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (based on Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel) is his favourite film of all time. Shakhnazarov characterises Chekhov’s story “Ward No.6” as a complex story that does not feature any positive characters. In his opinion, neither Gromov nor Ragin can be considered as positive characters. Yet Shakhnazarov’s sympathises with their search for a meaning of life. He thinks that the idea of using Chekhov’s dialogues in a contemporary setting exposes the banality and absurdity of the language of Russian mass media: “Более всего мне хотелось бы, чтобы услышали речь Чехова. Она удивительна. Я получил огромное удовольствие просто от того, что я слушал эти чеховские длинные диалоги и вдруг поймал себя на мысли, что я так устал от отсутствия хорошей русской речи в

15 Bykov, “The Two Chekhovs”, p.36.
окружении. Оказывается, она такая замечательная, красивая. Люди говорят о чем-то важном, не о пустоте, не эти бесконечные ток-шоу, где не известно, о чем идет речь, а какие-то серьезные, важные вещи люди пытаются решить для себя. Само по себе это уже, мне кажется, очень важно”.

The contemporary Russian critic N.M. Garmiza finds Shaknazarov’s loose adaptation of Chekhov’s story with the help of documentary style narration highly effective because it questions the notion of madness and the criteria applied to it by contemporary doctors and politicians. She maintains: “Кого считать больным, а кого нормальным в нравственно нездоровом обществе – собственно, этими вопросами мучился Чехов. Актуальны они и поньне, поэтому осовременивание чеховской повести у меня, например, не вызвало чувства протеста. [...] Нынешняя Россия, к сожалению, более соотносится с другим чеховским образом – «Палатой № 6» – так утверждают режиссёр К. Шахназаров и исполнитель главной роли Владимир Ильин, заслуженно отмеченный на последнем Московском кинофестивале призом за лучшую мужскую роль”. By using real mental patients in his interviews and in the final scene of a party, Garmiza maintains, the narrator articulates the relevance of Chekhov’s melancholy to Russian contemporary post-utopian reality. Garmiza thinks that the main goal of the film is to expose the madness of Russian life today: “Написанная более ста лет назад повесть о докторе Рагине, нашедшем свое место в больничной ‘Палате № 6’, воспринимается сегодня как пророчество. Неужели эта палата навсегда останется в сознании мыслящего человека спасительным островом во всеобщем хаосе жизни, среди всеобщего равнодушия и цинизма? Да, и в этом фильме думающий зритель вряд ли увидит позитивный образ современной России”.

According to Garmiza, Shakhnazarov’s film is representative of Russian non-commercial cinema of the 2000s that aspires to find an adequate expression for pain and trauma.

N.V. Suleneva points out that the main intonation of Shakhnazarov’s film articulates a sense of awkwardness that occurs during the discussion of Regin’s eccentric behaviour. She thinks that both actors and real patients in the hospital where the interviews were filmed use pauses and hesitation in expressing their observations about Regin’s mental state. She highlights the effective use of pauses in the communication between the narrator and his interviewees and defines them as psychological pauses. This device is used often in Japanese poetry. It is defined as makura-kotoba or a pillow-word. It occurs when the speaker needs to have a pause before pronouncing another word or a phrase and he uses some in-between words that enable him to finish his sentence. This device creates an impression that the speaker cannot find a right word to describe his emotions and feelings in a coherent way. The use of these words and phrases interrupts the natural flow of speech. Suleneva’s observation points to the absence of the symbolic language that enables the speaker to describe adequately his trauma.

The use of such a fragmented type of communication in Shakhnazarov’s film invokes the use of visual language in Ilya Kabakov’s works discussed above. Kabakov visualises various fleeting traces of memory that are difficult to articulate verbally. “In Kabakov’s art,”

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Murav notes, “fragments of Jewish history, both Soviet and post-Soviet, are invoked, but only fleetingly; or, better, they appear in order to disappear”. Commenting on Kabakov’s installation “Alternative History”, she writes: “[…] contrast, the simulacrum and the trace are precisely what Kabakov’s ‘Alternative History’ draw attention to, without providing the closure of conventional narrative. The ‘Museum’ reveals that the engine producing raw material for alternative history is still operating in full force in post-Soviet Russia, and that Kabakov co-exists with it in an uneasy tension”.

In a similar vein, Shakhnazarov’s film features different individual experiences pertaining to traumatic void. The disjointed language used in the film and the use of silence bring to the fore the director’s allusions to suppressed memories of traumatic events of the past. Such an allusive language exposes the myth about Soviet life. Soviet propaganda art and media used to portray Soviet life as being radiant and happy. In contrast to this positive image of Soviet life, Shakhnazarov’s film suggests that the post-Soviet trauma derives from Soviet suppression of memory and violence. It also questions the sustainability of the Soviet vision of the collective identity based on lies, mythologised narrative of the past and positivist ideals. The visual images of interviewees who struggle to express their thoughts and feelings graphically disrupt the possibility of monumentality and underscore fragmentation.

Alexander Burry thinks that the interviews of the present-day patients that open the film “offer a concise summary of the story’s major themes and recontextualise them in current Russian reality” and enable Shakhnazarov to double major parts of the conversations between Ragin and Gromov pertaining to childhood trauma, redemption, and immortality.

I think that the main role of the interviews is to show the complexity of Russian post-utopian identity. It is not coincidental that one of the patients talks to the camera operator about his belief in God in an affirmative way: “Of course I believe, and I will [continue to] believe.” This statement reassures the Russian audience that a national identity grounded in spiritual tradition ensures the survival of Russian culture. By putting on display the state of the Russian language in today’s Russia, Shkhznazarov reminds his audience about the similarities between religious ritual and language. Both of them presuppose an original signified, capable of grounding signification in stable meaning, as evident in Christian discourses on the ‘Word’ as divine Logos. Ritual and language both enable the sensible to transcend. The state of semiotic and hermeneutic uncertainty has been overcome in Shakhnazarov’s film by the ability of Ragov to see things in a different way. As N. N. Gasheva has noted, the film challenges Chekhov’s pessimistic depiction of Russian intelligentsia. In her view, the image of two laughing girls in the film alludes to innocent children who in the eyes of Jesus Christ should possess the divine world. She states: “Вместе с тем режиссер полемизирует с Чеховым, не оставляя читателю утешения, – в фильме Господь посылает герою страдание, испытание, но и надежду, и человеческое участие, и ангела-хранителя. Может быть, именно теперь, потеряв свой докторский статус, оказавшись забольничной решёткой, герой и воскреснет для новой, осмысленной жизни, наполнив ее деятельным добром. Символическая рамка истории главного персонажа обозначена двумя крупными планами: в начале фильма – это умственно отсталый пациент клиники, молодой человек, с трудом произносящий слова искренней веры в окончательную победу добра над злом, и в конце фильма – лица двух смеющихся

маленьких девочек, отсылающих зрительскую память к словам Иисуса Христа о невинных детях, не ведающих зла мира, которым и принадлежит царство небесное”.23