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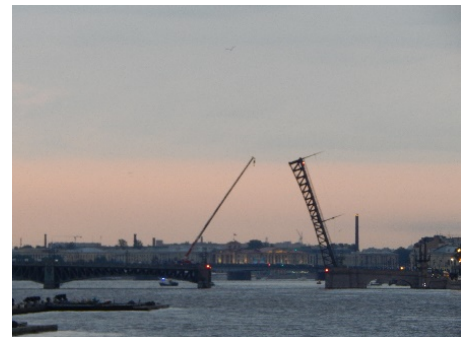
Study Abroad Class: Summer 2015

### **White Nights and Scarlet Sails:**

#### **Measuring Modern Carnival through the Bakhtinian Lens**

As the clock struck two a.m. we met on a corner near our apartments. We leisurely strolled through the city, absorbing the oddity of St. Petersburg's sunbathed streets. After several weeks of living in St. Petersburg, we approached the Neva River in time to watch the bridges rise. We joined spectators from around the world gathering on the Neva embankment to witness the nightly St. Petersburg phenomenon. Similar to small children on Christmas Eve anticipating the coming excitement, the crowd shared the general feeling of wondrous jubilation. In the blink of an eye, the lighted bridges divided majestically and rose above the river. Awestruck by the picturesque scene's unnatural beauty, we gazed upon the Winter Palace's monolithic grandeur as ships gracefully floated down the Neva. The euphoric moment seemed to exist beyond the measure of time. This moment was the meeting place of history and modernity—an unforgettable snapshot perfectly capturing summer in St. Petersburg.

Due to St. Petersburg's extreme northern location, the city is perpetually bathed in ubiquitous sunlight every summer from the end of May to mid-July. During the longest days of the year, the sun never fully sets and the city is resurrected from months of bitter winter darkness. These supernatural *belye nochi*, or White Nights, spark celebratory fervor throughout the city and attract millions of curious spectators to St. Petersburg. The prolonged hours of daylight and massive influx of tourism



during White Nights creates an atmosphere of newfound freedom throughout the city. Liveliness and excitement fill the northern capital's streets well into the early morning hours.

The city holds a series of festivities to celebrate White Nights, including daily operas, ballets, and classical music concerts at the Mariinskii Theatre, attracting some of Russia's most prominent performers (Mocatta 2015). The White Nights concert series venerates Russia's proud tradition of meticulously executed performing arts and celebrates highbrow culture. Additionally, daily concerts help make high culture routinely available to residents of St. Petersburg throughout the summer season. Additionally, the annual International Economic Forum at the end of June, attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin himself, consequentially contributes to the chaos of St. Petersburg and floods the city with police. The climactic celebration of the White Nights Festival is Scarlet Sails, or *Alye parusa*. Advertisements for the grandiose event decorate the city, exponentially building suspense with every billboard and poster.

### **The Scarlet Sails Celebration**

The Scarlet Sails event attracts over a million visitors to St. Petersburg. Colossal crowds gather along the Neva to observe the colorfully lit Peter and Paul Fortress, experience the thrill of an extravagant fireworks display, and watch the Scarlet Sails majestically float along the river. Participants of all ages come together, hours before the event commences, hoping to snag the perfect spot in front of the Winter Palace to watch the show unfold. Giddy high school girls wrapped in blankets take photos and flirt with young police officers. Parents of rambunctious tiny tots attempt to maintain their children's

attention with snacks from nearby street vendors. Grandmothers huddle beneath umbrellas to shelter from the glistening rain, reminiscing about their own school days and bragging about their grandchildren's' latest achievements. Police officers pace up and down riverbanks and bridges, carefully observing the crowds and quietly passing on important orders. Drunk twentysomethings humorously yell obscenities and the crowd roars with laughter.



With time, the crowd becomes increasingly restless and personal space is completely disregarded. After nearly five hours of standing on the Palace Bridge, or *Dvortsovy most*, the official celebration begins. The crowd wondrously coos at the fireworks and passionately cheers for the Scarlet Sails. The Peter and Paul Fortress is colorfully lit; classical music plays over loudspeakers and fills the air. The show's conclusion initiates a mass exodus from the riverbanks to other parts of the city. Hungry attendees flood nearby produce shops, or *produkty*, and rowdy partygoers descend upon St. Petersburg's nightlife. Mothers hold onto their exhausted young children and head to the subway, which runs later than the normal hours of operation due to the massive crowds of Scarlet Sails. A wave of exhilarated pedestrians overruns the streets, collides with traffic, and creates confusing havoc among drivers. Post Scarlet Sails chaos ensues.

St. Petersburg's Scarlet Sails festival presents an opportunity to assess Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about medieval carnival celebrations in a modern context. Because Scarlet Sails is part of a series of celebrations during the greater White Nights Festival in St. Petersburg, it creates the ideal conditions to test Bakhtin's theories in a modern setting. Though an isolated, singular celebration, Scarlet Sails contributes to the

collective festive sentiment of the White Nights' Festival. For the purposes of this paper, Scarlet Sails is examined as an excerpt of the greater White Nights Festival and measured according to Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

### **What is Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival?**

In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes about the laws and rituals of medieval carnival. Bakhtin describes how carnival is not simply an isolated spectacle existing apart from daily life, but a way of living in which everyone participates due to the all-inclusive nature of carnival (Bakhtin 7-8). There is no separation between carnival and everyday life. Carnival does not discriminate; every individual's life becomes intertwined with carnival regardless of social standing. The very essence of carnival tears down social barriers by embracing all groups of people and ideas.

Historically, carnival requires authoritative monarchs to defer their power for the duration of carnival. Bakhtin argues that carnival exists under its own social autonomy, meaning "during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (8). Operating under its own sovereignty, carnival provides a certain liberty from official church regulation, thus opening lines of communication for new thought and discussion. The all-inclusive nature of carnival breaks down the traditional hierarchical social structure and levels the social playing field. Bakhtin argues that carnival is a period of social upheaval and freedom of expression.

### **Does Scarlet Sails Adhere to the Bakhtinian Paradigm of Carnival?**

The White Nights Festival lasts from May to July, making the festival a viable candidate to test Bakhtin's theories in a modern setting. Bakhtin describes how "celebrations of a carnival type represented a considerable part of life of medieval men. . . large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities" (Bakhtin 13). White Nights shapes the lives of St. Petersburg residents because individuals experience and celebrate the natural phenomenon every summer. White Nights is entirely inescapable in St. Petersburg, which reflects Bakhtin's idea that carnival becomes intertwined with everyday life.

Regardless of whether an individual chooses to participate in the summer's festivities, residents of St. Petersburg experience White Nights. Life in St. Petersburg changes during White Nights to encompass the entire city in the brightness of night. Similar to Bakhtin's description of carnival, White Nights is all-inclusive; it does not discriminate based on social standing. White Nights exists according to its own laws of nature and is not subject to the church or state's authoritative control. Thus, the White Nights Festival and every event scheduled to celebrate White Nights is closely monitored and dictated by governmental authorities—namely the police. Therefore, White Nights adheres to Bakhtin's paradigm of carnival, but the White Nights Festival itself does not completely align with the medieval view of carnival autonomy.

The massive gathering of individuals hoping to catch a glimpse of the fireworks and Scarlet Sails breaks down traditional social barriers. The spectators are united in a shared goal. The heterogeneous crowd is diverse in age, gender, familial and marital status, and occupation. Russia's traditional social structure is blurred in the masses waiting to see the Scarlet Sails. Older and younger generations stand alongside one another, waiting

countless hours for the celebratory events to begin. Although tension rises among the crowd as the hours grow longer, once the music begins and fireworks light up the sky, inter-spectator angst melts into a collective celebratory sentiment.

While certain aspects of Bakhtin's theory of carnival remain true during the Scarlet Sails celebration, such as the complete dissolution of social identity and the blurring of society's hierarchal structure, the Scarlet Sails celebration does not holistically adhere to Bakhtin's paradigm of carnival. Although the phenomenon of White Nights is inescapable for the citizens of St. Petersburg, participating in the Scarlet Sails celebration is completely voluntary. Whereas Bakhtin presents the idea that carnival festivities become synonymous with daily life, the Scarlet Sails celebration is removed enough from daily life that citizens may choose not to partake in the festivities and indulge in the chaos. The separation between participants and the rest of St. Petersburg's residents creates a divide that conflicts with Bakhtin's theory.

Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque is an essential element of carnival life. The grotesque is exactly as it sounds—obscene behavior and unnatural images permitted during carnival festivities that would otherwise be appalling in everyday life. Images of grotesqueness include desecration of the human body, public excretion of fecal matter, vomiting, and bestiality (Bakhtin 315). Additionally, Bakhtin describes the use of pervasive "language which mocks and insults the deity" during carnival (16). Accompanying the White Night festivities is the thematic abuse of language, a natural byproduct of celebratory alcoholic indulgence. As evidence of grotesque themes during modern carnivals, intoxicated revelers carelessly bellowed profanities over the mumbling crowds all night long. After the official events had concluded and the mass exodus had begun, innumerable

instances of grotesque infected the streets of St. Petersburg. Reckless drivers raced wildly down crowded roads. One hooligan, dressed in a wolf's head and paws, dangerously sat in the passenger window as his took the wheel and sped away. A white convertible cruised along with two blondes standing in the back seat. Another car with an AK-47 logo printed on its back



windshield frantically screeched its tires while making a sharp U-turn into oncoming traffic. The Scarlet Sails afterparty posed a greater threat of grotesque and danger than the officially scheduled events. Although images of grotesque are evident during the Scarlet Sails celebration, the state does not completely abandon authoritative control over St. Petersburg. Scarlet Sails illustrates the state's attempt to mediate reckless abandonment of intoxicated partyers after the official family-friendly celebration concludes.

The imposing police presence during Scarlet Sails reinforces governmental authority and contradicts Bakhtin's theory that carnival is independently autonomous and subject to its own laws. The heavy police presence throughout the city of St. Petersburg in general serves as a reminder of government authority, but it is especially concentrated during the Scarlet Sails celebration. Despite the festivities, the state is ultimately in control and total chaos is *not* permitted during Scarlet Sails. The spectators at Scarlet Sails were sectioned off by barricades and carefully observed by the police. Officers constantly walked along the bridges and streets to moderate the crowd's behavior and communicate orders with other officers. The police seemed particularly aggressive toward "troublemakers" at the Scarlet Sails. One particularly churlish officer grabbed a teenager by the ear and dragged her away from her group of friends. The police officer's actual

words were inaudible over the roaring crowd, but the young girl's expression reflected immense fear. Although Scarlet Sails fuels a certain level of chaos in St. Petersburg, the government's authoritative control is never forsaken. The police prevent complete self-destructive entropy from engulfing the city. Where Bakhtin's carnival operates according to its own laws, the White Nights Festival, and specifically Scarlet Sails, are mandated on authority of the Russian state.

Although Bakhtin's ideas pertain to medieval carnival specifically, certain laws of carnival still apply to modern festivals, as evident through Russia's annual Scarlet Sails celebration. The blurring of social rank and loss of strict social categorization among the overall celebratory fervor remain true in modern environments. Images and themes of the grotesque, frequently fueled by alcohol, remain prominent throughout the White Nights festival and Scarlet Sails. The state's officiating of festival events and impenetrable police presence during Scarlet Sails challenges Bakhtin's argument that carnival becomes independently autonomous for the duration of the celebration. State control also inhibits complete freedom of expression during the White Nights Festival.

Measuring Scarlet Sails through the Bakhtinian lens highlights similarities between past and present societies. The fluctuation in social hierarchy during celebratory festivities rings true then and now. Bakhtin's theory underscores a major difference between the role of carnival in medieval and modern societies. The complexity and size of modern society cannot afford to surrender control to the anarchy of carnival and hope to remain productive. Russia's White Nights festival celebrates the past and present; it is the meeting place of a natural phenomenon and busy metropolitan life.

Works Cited



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