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Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft

SPACE ODYSSEYS

BY J. HOBERMAN

tures, a single 96-minute tracking shot in which the invisible narrator and a historical figure, the 19th-century French Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreiden), accompany a lively group of dead souls across several centuries and through 33 rooms of the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg.

The narrator—who is, of course, Sokurov—wonders if this unfolding pageant has been staged for him, as well he might. Some 2000 costumed actors and extras, including a full symphony orchestra, rehearsed this unparalleled stunt for seven months before it was shot, on high-definition digital video saved to disc with a custom-built hard drive. A participant in the action, Tilman Büttner's camera peers into windows and swims among the artworks. The terrarium effect is enhanced as people slip and fall on cue, sidling through the slightly wide-angle field of vision. One can only imagine the crazy minuet going on behind the Steadicam.

A kind of human arabesque, arms folded behind his back, Custine skips and strides through the whispery corridors, recalling his previous visit to the Winter Palace and commenting on the half-baked state of Russian culture. The narrator mildly contradicts—and at times, defensively corrects—the caustic marquis's remarks as they wander together through history's backstage, glimpsing Peter the Great beating one of his generals and Catherine II watching a performance in rehearsal (and then frantically searching for a pot to piss in).

Russian Ark is blithely anachronistic and slyly achronological. The walls are hung with images of frozen tumult. A blind woman—later identified as an angel—explicates a Van Dyck painting of Madonna and child. The marquis meets the Hermitage's current director and complains that there's an aroma of formaldehyde. Eluding an attempt to close the museum on them, Custine and the narrator stumble upon a royal presentation—emissaries sent by the shah of Persia to apologize to Nicholas I for the murder of some Russian diplomats—and catch sight of Alexander III *en famille*. When the pair open the wrong door, a custodial worker reproaches them for treading on the corpses of World War I. (The Nazi siege of Leningrad goes tactfully unmentioned.)

Although the viewer may be only intermittently aware of the ongoing tour de force, *Russian Ark* builds in hypnotic intensity toward a suitably mind-boggling finale of the Hermitage's last royal ball in 1913. For eight minutes or so, the camera circles around and threads between hundreds of courtiers dancing the mazurka in the huge Nicholas Hall. (The marquis joins in.) Sokurov can be forgiven for the inscribed applause as the last chord sounds in this crescendo and a sense of pleasurable exhausted melancholy descends.

"Everyone can see the future but no one remembers the past," someone remarks. In a final flourish, Sokurov's camera cavorts behind and—coming off the grand staircase—pirouettes ahead to gaze back at the exiting throng, revealing more and more people as the narrator murmurs his farewell. History disappears into the Petersburg mist. The long day closes and the long take becomes its own meaning in this dazzling dance to the music of time. **V**

RUSSIAN ARK

Directed by Alexander Sokurov
Written by Sokurov and Anatoly Nikiforov
Wellspring Opens December 13

» *Solaris* notwithstanding, the year's ultimate space odyssey is actually scheduled to open theatrically December 13. Alexander Sokurov's sublime *Russian Ark*—screened once at the last New York Film Festival—is the longest continuous take in the annals of motion pic-