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The Museum As Time Machine

In "Russian Ark," a new, audaciously conceived film by Alexander Sokurov, the Hermitage Museum is at once the setting and the protagonist.

BY JAMEY GAMBRELL

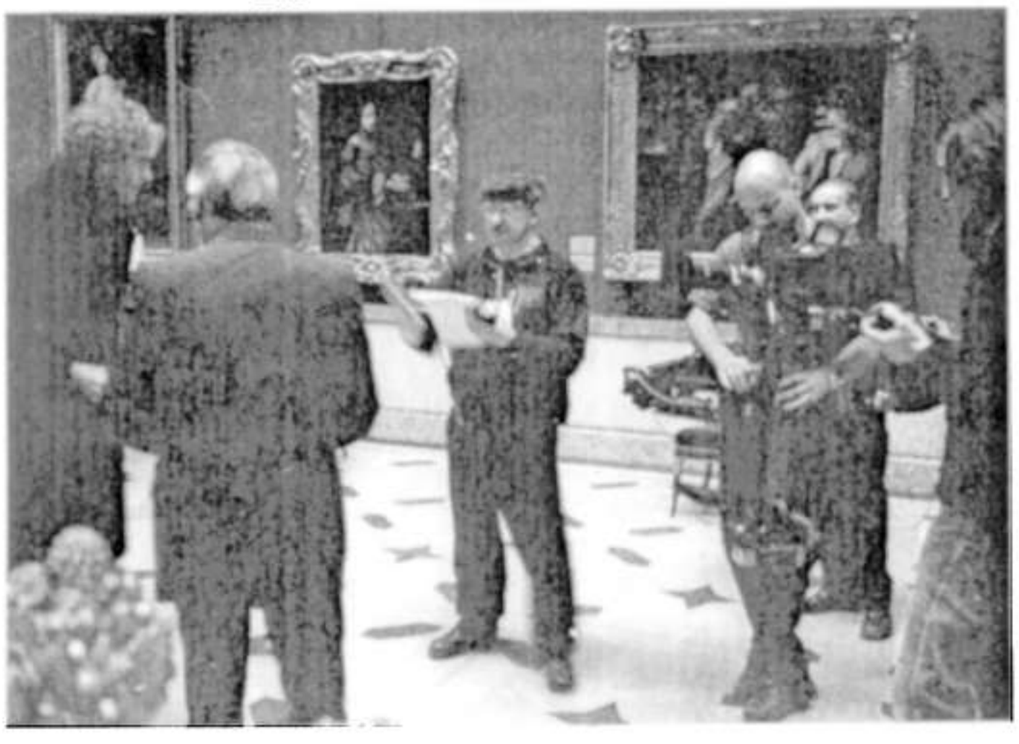
Alexander Sokurov is little known in the United States, but he is a veteran filmmaker with more than a dozen features and 25 documentaries to his name. His work has won numerous international prizes and earned praise from prominent cinephiles such as Susan Sontag. Born into a Russian military family in 1951, he received his degree in history in 1974 and then began film studies at Moscow's prestigious All-Union Cinematography Institute (VGIK). His early work, including a film based on a short story by Andrei Platonov, was not well received by VGIK's administration, but the support of the revered (if officially out-of-favor) filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky resulted in a job at Lenfilm Studio, where Sokurov subsequently made many of his features and most of his documentaries. His films include homages to Shostakovich (1981), "elegies" to Moscow, St. Petersburg and the Soviet Union (1986-88, 1990 and 1990, respectively), the dreamlike *Whispering Pages* (1993), based on classics of 19th-century Russian literature, and *Moloch* (1999), a controversial feature about Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun.

Sokurov's new film, *Russian Ark,* is a compelling meditation on history, memory, time—and art, which he sees as the binding resin that keeps the ark of civilization afloat. The history in question is Russian, and the ark is St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, one of the world's greatest repositories of European art and civilization. The Hermitage collection was begun in the mid-1760s by Catherine II, the German-born princess, wife of Emperor Peter III, who engineered a palace coup and usurped her husband's throne. She became Russia's own Catherine the Great, just as the museum she and subsequent generations of Russian rulers filled with the art of Western Europe became Russia's own, its greatest museum.

Although Catherine and other notable figures appear in *Russian Ark*, the Hermitage is the real protagonist of Sokurov's film—the museum is presented as a living being with a memory and a consciousness capable of embracing not only 300 years of Russian history but lands and centuries far removed from its actual location. Equally striking is the film's technique: *Russian Ark* consists of a single, unbroken take lasting 96 minutes. It was recorded on a high-definition digital camera attached to a portable hard disk designed specially for this film, and subsequently transferred to film. Digital imaging was used in postproduction to adjust the color, lighting and composition in preparation for transfer to 35mm film, as well as to create certain images, such as the clouds over the Neva River at the end of the film, but no cuts were made in the image flow. Accommodating the possibilities offered by the new technology involved mind-boggling logistics: a huge support crew (22 assistant directors alone), a cast of nearly a thousand in period costumes ranging from the early 18th to the 20th century, and three orchestras had to give a perfectly coordinated theatrical performance as the camera (a very heavy affair held by Tilman Büttner, the German director of photography) followed a path nearly a mile long through the museum. And they had only one day of filming to do so; two takes had to be scrapped due to mishaps and mistakes, but the third shoot was successful.

Scene from **Russian Ark**, *showing Sergey Dreiden as the Marquis in the Raphael Loggias at the Hermitage. Photo © 2003 Wellspring Media, Inc.*

Director Alexander Sokurov discussing a scene with the actors in the Small Italian Skylight Room. Photo Alexander Belenkiy.



Russian Ark opens with a black screen. Gradually a sliver of light appears, as though shining from under a door, and we hear a man's voice: "I opened my eyes and I saw nothing." Given the context, it is hard not to think of Malevich's black square, once declared to be the end of art. *Russian Ark* thus begins with the strong sense, underscored by its messianic title, that this is The End.

The same voice, the director's alter ego, becomes the viewer's guide as the camera wends its way through 33 of the Hermitage's halls. The Author, as he is referred to in Sokurov's notes, has awakened after some undefined catastrophe and finds himself at an entrance to the Hermitage, surrounded by men and women dressed in 19th-century finery who appear to be arriving for a ball. Wondering how and why he came to be there, he follows them. In the dark cellars of the palace, he soon meets an aristocratic, early 19th-century European who is as perplexed as he. The two time travelers form an alliance of necessity and wander, ghostlike (neither of them can be seen or heard by most of the other characters), through the Hermitage, observing its art and historical inhabitants.

Before the Russian Revolution, the Winter Palace and adjacent Hermitage were not primarily a museum; they were living and work quarters for the tsars' families and their staffs, and the emperor entertained the court and society within these walls. The snippets of the past that the Author and the "European" (as the Author calls him) witness are not those enshrined in the history books: Peter the Great, who founded St. Petersburg (the film's 2003 release coincides with the city's 300th anniversary) is seen beating one of his officers. They happen upon Catherine the Great watching a play with friends, and see her rush out of her private theater to relieve herself. Nicholas I is witnessed presiding at a deadly dull official court function; Nicholas II is glimpsed at breakfast with his doomed family. The poet Aleksandr Pushkin dashes in and out of view in pursuit of his flirtatious wife, Natalia Goncharova. Throughout, the European is shadowed by a Spy, a man in a black frock coat and white gloves who keeps track of his route.

The European makes scathing comments about

The special effects of this film are provided by the actual surroundings and the play of characters, rather than by an editor's scissors or computer animation.

Russia's political culture and Russians' artistic abilities. He compliments the Hermitage theater orchestra, saying they play so well, "they must be Europeans." "No, Russians . . . they're Russians," the Author objects. "Oh how well the Russians copy," the European cries on entering the Raphael Loggias, a copy of those in the Vatican down to the finest detail; "it's because you don't have any ideas of your own, your authorities do not wish you to have ideas of your own."

We learn at the end of the film that the European is the Marquis de Custine, a onetime French diplomat best known for an acerbic, occasionally inaccurate but uncannily prescient three-volume account of his journey through Russia: *La Russie en 1839*. At the time it was published, Custine's book was banned in Russia; more than 160 years old now, it still raises Russian hackles. Foreigners and Russians alike are struck by how many aspects of the country and culture seem unchanged to this day. Custine, a highly cultivated man of letters, whose father and grandfather were guillotined during the French Revolution, came to Russia seeking justification for monarchy; he left horrified at the social, moral and psychological effects of the tsars' tyranny upon the Russian people.

The former inhabitants and habitués of the Hermitage and the Winter Palace—emperors, poets, actors, ministers, courtiers, officers, major and minor nobility—make little more than cameo appearances in *Russian Ark*, but together they form an eccentric, achronological panorama of Russian history. Like the works of art on the walls and the walls themselves, they serve as catalysts for this odd couple's serious banter about Russia's national character, history, fate, art and—inevitably in any such discussion of Russia—its relationship with the West.

Maria Kuznetsova as Catherine the Great. Photo Alexander Belenkiy.

The art housed in the Hermitage is primarily Western European (St. Petersburg's Russian Museum is home to Russian art), and so stands in for the West's history and culture—rearranged, emulated, reinterpreted and absorbed by Russia and the Russians. "Why do you need to imitate the West," asks the Marquis with irritation, as he and the Author saunter through opulent galleries filled with Italian, Dutch, Flemish and Spanish painting and sculpture, and the camera lingers, sometimes filling the screen with paintings by Van Dyck, Rubens, Rembrandt, El Greco and the pristine marble of Canova's *Three Graces*.

Their excursion is not limited to the distant past. At one point Custine and his companion open a door and unexpectedly find themselves in a freezing room filled with empty frames and coffins. The drone of Nazi bombers can be heard overhead and the European learns of the price the city paid for saving itself and the museum during the Second World War: one million dead of starvation during the siege of Leningrad. They pass through the darkened Memorial Hall of Peter the Great (the Small Throne Room) where in the shadows Mikhail Piotrovsky, the present director of the Hermitage, discusses the fate of the museum and its art with actors playing the two previous directors—his father, Boris Piotrovsky, and Iosif Orbeli.

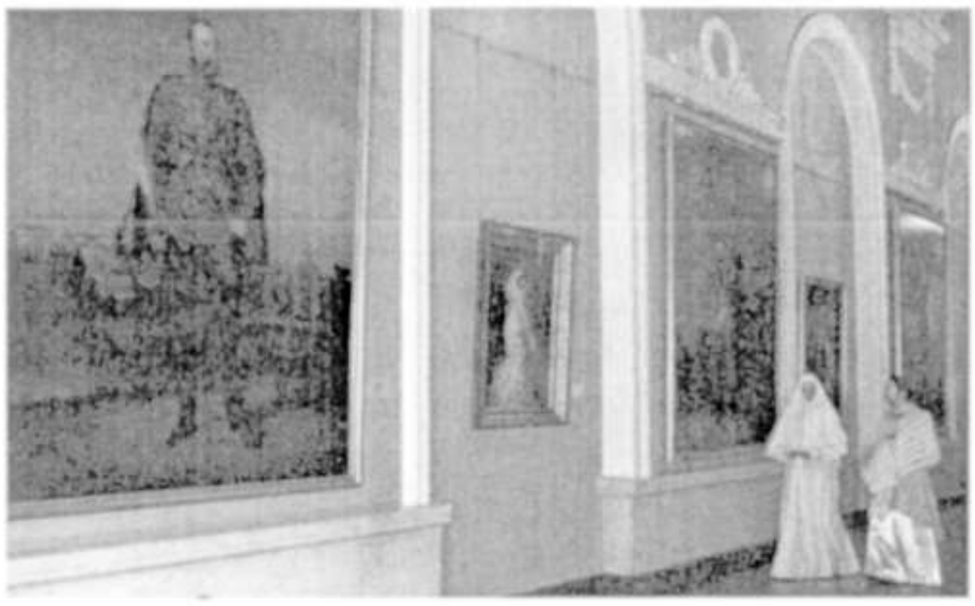
When they step into the Small Italian Skylight Room, the Author and the European enter the present day. The Marquis discourses with a connoisseur's knowledge on the artists and the paintings' provenances (he refers several times to Catherine II's controversial acquisition of the Crozat collection at a Paris auction in 1772). But he is mystified by the contemporary museum visitors he encounters. "What manner of people are these?" he asks in bewilderment. "To what estate do they belong? Why are they so badly dressed?" The Author introduces him to two friends, a doctor and an actor. The European thinks they reek of formaldehyde, while they think he does—presumably this is a sign that the Marquis's spirit or intelligence has been "preserved" into our century. He argues with them ("Is it beauty you love, or just the imitation of it?") and contemptuously dismisses their naive interest in the symbolism of a cat and a rooster in the foreground of Tintoretto's *Nativity of St. John the Baptist* (1550s).

The odor of formaldehyde is not the only indication that the European's sensibility belongs to a different era. Contemporary American and European viewers are placed on a par with the "provincial" Russians Custine criticizes in this scene. The Marquis is shocked that Cigoli's (Lodovico Cardi's) *The Circumcision of Christ* (late 1590s) and Carlo Dolci's *St. Cecilia* (second half of 1640s) hang next to Massimo Stazione's eroticized *Death of Cleopatra* (1630s-40s). Nor is this the only time his Roman Catholic allegiances are offended: later he confronts a 20th-century youth contemplating El Greco's *St. Peter and St. Paul* (1587-92) and accuses him of gross ignorance—how could he understand or appreciate this painting, what could it possibly mean to him, if he is not familiar with the scriptures of the Roman Church?

The film comes full circle as the costumed guests

Vladimir Baranov as the last czar, Nicholas II, dining with his family in the Winter Palace. Photo © 2003 Wellspring Media, Inc.

Two nuns walking in a gallery. Photo Alexander Belenkiy.



glimpsed at its beginning meander into the ball celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, the last great ball held at the Winter Palace, on the eve of the First World War. It was in a sense the grand finale of the monarchy, and it is *Russian Ark*'s grand finale, too, presided over by Valery Gergiev, the current artistic director and chief conductor of the Mariinsky Theater (well known to New York opera-goers for his frequent guest appearances at the Met).

Sokurov has created a seamless, richly layered dream of art and history. *Russian Ark* is a film devoid of the primary artifice of film, which is the reorganization and reconstitution of time through editing. Yet it accomplishes much the same thing using the shift from room to room of the Hermitage, where the movement from artist to artist is in effect a form of editing; the camera wanders in and out of centuries and crosses national borders with impunity. This film's special effects are provided by the actual surroundings and the play of characters, rather than by an editor's scissors or computer animation.

The film was shot in "real time"—but what is "real" time? This question lies at the heart of Sokurov's new work. It is hard to imagine a more "unreal time" than that of *Russian Ark*. The centuries and their inhabitants exist simultaneously, because in a museum like the Hermitage (as in human memory and consciousness, the film argues), there is no such thing as "the past." Or rather, the past is always present. □

Russian Ark *(2002) is distributed in the U.S. by Wellspring Media, Inc. Its Web site, www.wellspring.com, includes a listing of theaters where the film is showing.*

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