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Russian Ark, a 2002 film by Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov is one of the most astonishing and important films in cinematic history. This groundbreaking film is a remarkable aesthetic vision brought to life with innovative new technology to poignantly reflect, and comment, on Russian history. The scale to which Sokurov's masterpiece is delivered is staggering: 867 trained actors. 1,000 extras. 300 years of Russian history. 33 rooms in the palace of the former Russian Tsars. 3 live orchestras. 1 single, continuous shot. The film follows the first-person narrator (voiced by director Alexander Sokurov) who time-travels within the walls of the Russian Hermitage Museum, coming literally face-to-face with the past. Our narrator meets the only other "main" character, an eccentric 18th century French nobleman, The Marquis de Custine (played by Sergei Donstov) with whom he patiently strolls through the museum. Through his encounters with ghosts from the past, and in his conversations with The Marquis, *Russian Ark* broke boundaries to become the longest uninterrupted shot in film history and the first feature-length film to be produced in a single take.

The curtain rises with a voice, " 'My eyes are open, but I see nothing' " (qtd. in *Russian Ark*). In brief comments to himself the audience establishes that this is not the Narrator's time and he is quite surprised to find himself in the Hermitage. In the first moments we meet a group of unnamed aristocrats who become the bookends to the film (we'll meet them again in the finale), and by following them into the palace our Narrator meets The Marquis who is " 'wandering about too' " (qtd. in *Russian Ark*). The story is

developed by our Narrator who provides a fairly constant stream of commentary on his surroundings sometimes to the Marquis, but mostly to himself. As they seamlessly glide from room to room and from era to era, these two characters are almost ghosts themselves. Occasionally they are as flies on the wall—unseen and unheard by the occupants of the room, other times they are active participants in conversation and goings-on. The Marquis is the antithesis to the Russophile Narrator and comments on the disappointments of Russian art, architecture, music, poetry, history, monarchs and even Communism—“ ‘Russian music makes me break out in hives.’... ‘It has nothing to do with the music’ ” (qtd. in *Russian Ark*). The narrator is always unperturbed by the heavily biased judgments from Marquis de Custin. Their conversations are a chess game of scathing criticism and patient Devil’s Advocate that bring Sokurov’s poignant vision to life. Sokurov himself described the odd use of one-sided conversations as “clean”. He believed and hoped that using simple thoughts expressed in simple words would evoke very deep emotions (Sokurov. *In One Breath*). The conversations are ultimately a Frenchman’s, and generally a European’s, view on what collective Russian art and culture means, “ ‘Your authorities don’t want you to have ideas of your own’ ” He mutters. To which our Narrator noncommittally responds: “ ‘...they dreamed of Italy’ ” (qtd. in *Russian Ark*).

The relationship between the Narrator and the Marquis is indicative of the relationship that has existed between Europe and Russia for centuries and as described by the director,

It’s... a film about an encounter between a person from
Russia and a person from Europe. It’s an encounter

between two characters, two world views. It's an interesting and very ugly encounter...it's [one] which justifiably gives rise to great expectations. And this encounter is a symbol for Russia's attraction to, and love for, Europe, and a certain coldness towards Russia on the part of Europe, unfortunately. (Sokurov. In One Breath)

“ ‘Raphael wasn't mean for you... [he is] for Italy...’ ” (qtd. in *Russian Ark*) is how the Marquis succinctly sums up Sokurov's thoughts on his film. Yet even with Russia's efforts to embody the art movements delivered out of France and Italy, they fiercely retained their own identity. And the title of the film may be statement enough: *Russian Ark*. Within the opulent Hermitage is found a treasure; a rescuing ark of culture in the midst of degradation, icy government, and modernization of a vast country. Culture is an ark which keeps us all living. “ ‘Look, the sea is all around. We are destined to sail forever... to live forever’ ” (qtd. in *Russian Ark*). The Hermitage, is the incarnation of culture as art and culture as life. And the film *Russian Ark* clearly and obviously displays these concepts.

The cinematography is an artistic composition in itself and its greatest success of the film. Audiences have been trained to ignore the camera through silent editing techniques and subtle camera shots. Today's films are rhythmic; they “breathe” with natural pauses and changes. Directors use editing to build tension within a scene and then release it. The norm today is for the camera to facilitate smooth and easy watching of what has become more important: the story. But in *Russian Ark* the camera *is* the story, and instead of getting out of the way it takes center stage. The hovering motion of the

camera uninterrupted by cuts creates a whole new visual experience. When the film begins, the audience is subconsciously waiting for that break; that blink; that rest. But it never comes. Irritation builds as the camera wavers over obvious “cut” places. The static behavior of the camera lends a stage-like production of the film and therefore *Russian Ark* becomes a rollercoaster of crescendos and decrescendos. Real Time is translated directly onto the film; the ebb and flow of the film is quiet, smooth, delicate, and ever-present. Somewhere in the middle of the film you forget about the initial irritation and learn to swim along. We walk persistent and patient through the honest and raw reverie Sokurov has created. The cinematography is as true-to-life as it has ever come in cinema: it is continuous with no distinctive breaks, or cut, or shifts. Ebert comments on this aesthetic principle by saying “If cinema is sometimes dreamlike, then every edit is an awakening” (Ebert, par. 7). We are audience to the film just as we are audience to history-in-the-making. Likewise, the cinematography is as complex as it is simple. Scenes stripped and naked of any editing are left to reach full emotional potential. They are unfettered from director or editor opinion and it is only what is on screen what has the power to convey the emotion in the heartbreak of an imprisoned artisan, the loneliness of a Tsarina or the anger of a starving nation. Since these scenes are boundless their significance peaks in seconds rather than minutes. The stark and exposed images are relayed with a personal impact that dialogue could never capture. The idiom “a picture says a thousand words” rings true with a nearly painful clarity.

The film was a simple-enough concept but one that filmmakers had grappled with for decades. Cinematic vision cannot be rendered without technical venues, yet filmmakers have always been perpetually limited by how far the technology can take

them. In the case of *Russian Ark's* length the equipment and technology simply didn't exist to capture that much shooting on one medium. But all that changed with the digital world and the exponential growth of computer capacity. This unprecedented feat was made possible by specially-designed pieces of equipment: a Steadicam, and by a recording disc which rotates like a CD rather than winds like tape. The master in charge of the execution was cameraman and Director of Photography Tilman Büttner. This amazing camera is strapped to its operator and sits in a harness attached to counter-balanced swiveling arms that smoothly allow the camera to pan 360°. The freedom garnered from the harness allows the director to perfectly track down large sets and at any speed. (Steadicam, par. 1). Büttner described the apparatus with which he was specially equipped:

I had a high-definition camera, the recorder system was one-off; they had a special, carbon Steadicam vest made in Canada, with a different weight distribution. The Steadicam was specially made for me in Wiesbaden. There were special batteries which were light, but still weighed 35 kg (Buttner. In One Breath).

The batteries which were the cincher of production were carried like a backpack on one of the assistants in the camera's operating group. Since mobility was vital there were only a handful of wires running between the camera and its life support; nothing was ever plugged into the wall during filming (In One Breath). For a film that is one take and 96 minutes long, this was unprecedented. With the freedom gained in the nearly-wireless camera and the CD-like recording system, *Russian Ark* was transferred digitally onto

computer minute by minute during filming. The final footage we see on screen is the same footage Büttner and Sokurov viewed live in the Hermitage. The only retouching the film received was mild digital enhancement limited to lighting, shadowing or snow (In One Breath).

Compared to the massive undertaking in logistics of production, the technology developments and customizations seem minor. The artistry organized by Sokurov and his team is nothing short of a ballet. Directors, producers, technicians, designers and representatives from the Hermitage prepared for four years outside of the Hermitage to meet together with 2,000 actors on December 23, 2001 for the first and only day of shooting (In One Breath). With the goal being to make the film in one take it was not an option to edit out mistakes or technical mishaps afterwards. Each scene had to be committed to memory by the actors; each was mapped out on paper prior to filming. Büttner wrote his 1.5km cinematic stroll like the Fox Trot on the floor and carefully timed actor entrances coincided precisely with the camera's sweep through a gallery. These maneuvers required twenty-two Assistant Directors in three groups: one to advance before the camera to ready the next scene, another to follow the camera and actively coordinate the hundreds of people around Büttner and finally a third to follow behind to do damage control and oversee the immediate tear-down of the set (In One Breath). The Hermitage was closed for only one day and in thirty-six hours set up, filming, and wrap had to happen in what would've taken months in a studio. The feats of the costume designed alone are flaunted in the final scenes: 1,000 as-of-yet unseen talent, each fully dressed in opulent 19th century Russian fashion at the grand ball of 1913. Fifty make-up artists and costume designers ensured each costume was authentic to its time

and specially made per actor. Every detail was exact and precise: real gold thread, real silk. Even some of the actresses' jewelry was real (In One Breath).

The climax of the film is the eighteen minutes the live orchestra continuously plays to the 300 pairs of dancers (In One Breath). With the rise and fall of the orchestra we are allowed to reflect on the similar rise and fall of the Russian empire. The importance of this unique climax is not what is shown, but what is not. Sokurov saturates the viewer in images the opulence and of a culture momentarily overjoyed with life and chooses to omit foreshadowing of the decades of sadness which follow. The ball closes with thunderous applause and the finale moments are captured by a seamless backwards sweep through thousands so that we may see their faces. The socialites slowly exit the palace, just as history showed the reign of Russian monarchy to be exiting the world stage. “ ‘It's over’ ” (qtd. in *Russian Ark*) the Marquis sighs and takes in what is left of his rich surroundings. The camera reaches each corner, saying farewell to a grand and revolutionary feature.

“For me, something can only be ascribed revolutionary status if the quality of the artistic result merits it” (Sokurov. *In One Breath*), and without doubt *Russian Ark* is an artistic triumph. It is an achievement of unmatched standards and a graceful tour-de-force through cinematic boundaries and cultural reflection. The expanse of this film is beautifully echoed in the cavernous Hermitage, shown literally in the limitless cinematography and colored by the culture identity of Russia. It is film to be admired, studied and revered as the masterpiece it is.