

## FLOATING ON THE BORDERS OF EUROPE SOKUROV'S *RUSSIAN ARK*

**O**n the table, in the glow of the wax candle, stood the tiny bronze Europa riding a galloping bull. Balocanksi took the tiny figurine in his hand and began to examine it under the light holding it close to his eyes, so that he seemed to be sniffing at the little Europa like a dog.

—Miroslav Krleža, *The Return of Philip Latinowicz*

THIS VIGNETTE FROM KRLEZA'S 1932 novel with its image of sniffing might encapsulate the complex relationship of Europe to what Etienne Balibar has called its double borders—those lands that are both within and outside of European borders.<sup>1</sup> Like many films from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean (such as the work of Theodoros Angelopoulos, Youssef Chahine, and Gianni Amelio), Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russkij kovcheg/Russian Ark* (2003) examines the identity and national politics that emerge from such desirous orientations toward Europe. Yet rather than represent this (unfortunately unrequited) sniffing as a form of pure adulation of the figure of Europe on the part of the liminal or non-European, these films reveal the instability of geographical, historical, and cultural points of reference. This does not mean that they place the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe in the proverbial backwaters, at the crossroads between Europe and Asia (or the Orient). But by looking toward Europe, they examine the placement (or self-placement) of the "East" in Europe's master narratives (of progress, civilization, development), wherein "Easterners" must struggle for national and ethnic identities that conform to notions of European statehood and culture. A central issue in *Russian Ark* is the spread of enlightenment thought and the rise of the nation-state, and with it various forms of nationalism. Accompanying the age of the nation-state—first its emergence from under the

tutelage of Empire, and second its ferocious return after the fall of Soviet-styled socialism—there has been an explosion of discourses about nationalism and nostalgia. Many critics have pointed out that nostalgia signifies a longing (*algia*) to "return" home (*nostos*). The construction of a homeland, driven by longing, can in turn conveniently be used as a means of legitimizing the "emerging" nation-state after the age of Empire (Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian) and the Cold World order. This "return" to the nation-state, however, as Benedict Anderson and Stathis Gourgouris argue,<sup>2</sup> is more a product of imagination and dreams than an historical fact, since it involves rather forgetting the recent past (and even present) than recollecting a distant history. *Russian Ark* demonstrates how nostalgia for an imaginary past often produces various forms of erasure and national myths of origin. It treats history not as fact but as a poetic construction that has drifted in and out of Europe via metaphor, allusion, and myth.

*Russian Ark* begins with the anxiety produced by a sense of disorientation. The establishing shot is one of complete darkness accompanied by a cacophony of sounds—the wind, a ship's foghorn, the tuning of instruments, the sound of moving water, muffled laughter, and distorted musical accents that merge into one another to become indistinguishable. This haunting background sound reappears throughout the remaining 90 minutes of film. A voice (Sokurov's own)



Francesco Albani's *The Rape of Europa* (circa 1640-45), now housed in the Hermitage

emerges out of the darkness and, almost as if in an internal monologue, seeks to orient itself: “I open my eyes and I see nothing, I remember only that there was some calamity . . . but I just can’t remember what happened to me.” Alluding to the opening lines of Dante’s *Inferno* (and Pushkin’s allegorical images of the flood of St. Petersburg in 1824), this lost soul seems to have strayed from the course of time.<sup>3</sup> There is no beginning or ending to this film; no foreboding entrance (as in the case of Dante’s *Inferno*), only an unexpected immersion in what appears to be the simultaneous presence of various layers of the past. The images that suddenly appear out of nowhere before this off-screen persona are fleeting and sporadic recollections of historical scenes, interactions, and performances anachronistically joined into one spectacular, continuous, unedited shot. Though time is certainly out of joint, this persona will remain estranged from the “action” of the film. As the voice (and the camera) follows a group of eighteenth-century officers and ladies through the back entrance of the Hermitage—presumably the one designated for people of lesser rank and court performers—he remarks, “Can it be that I am invisible, or simply gone unnoticed?” The fact that there is no identifying shot leaves the identity behind the persona of the voice ambiguous; it could be the voice of the museum itself that witnesses history and the various Russian figures that float through its halls, the gaze of the camera that records

and frames its own image of history, architecture, and artifacts, or the specter of an uncertain and indeterminate Russian present that haunts the halls of its monumental past. Yet this monumental past is quite exclusive, limited not only to the space of the Hermitage museum and the Winter Palace (the main residence of the Czars), but also to the epoch of Petrine reforms—from the time of Peter the Great to Czar Nicholas II.

Later in the film, the “calamity” from which this solitary voice claims to awaken is clearly identified with the almost 80 years of Soviet rule. The entire Soviet period is presented as an ellipsis in Russian history that is left unnamed and unrepresented in the film. Yet the presence of an half-forgotten memory, neither truly there nor absent, haunts this Russian Ark, especially since the Hermitage and the Winter Palace played such a significant iconographic role in the Bolshevik Revolution and its commemoration in Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* (*Oktyabr* [1927]) and Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* (*Konets Sankt-Peterburga* [1927]). As Dragan Kujundzić argues, *Russian Ark*’s composition as a single long take “enacts the erasure of the dominant cinematic tradition . . . of Sergei Eisenstein’s intellectual montage.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, the film reverses the frenzied finale of *October* that depicts the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace, climbing the famous Jordan staircase and unseating Kerenski and the provisional government,



Czar Nicholas with his family

which historically took place in the very same room we see in *Russian Ark*. This time, however, the room is the stage for an intimate domestic scene of Czar Nicholas II having a meal with his family. These images of Nicholas II and his family are over-exposed (with a slightly reddish hue), giving the figures a ghostly, if not saintly, quality, while also suggesting that they have been worn out by various competing histories and fantasies (such as Disney's *Anastasia*). Yet the reddish cast also reminds us that they have been bathed in blood. As opposed to the triumphal ending of *October*, *Russian Ark* concludes with the languid flow of Russian nobles (from various periods) down the same Jordan staircase and out of the palace toward both a certain (Soviet) and uncertain (post-Soviet) future.

The deliberate omission of references to the Bolshevik Revolution replicates not only the long history of forced forgetting conducted by the Soviet state, but also draws attention to the current erasure of names—the Soviet Union has disintegrated into various nation-states, and in 1991 Leningrad once again became St. Petersburg. The replacement of names with exclusively nationalist ones turns the memory of lived experience into the politics of memory. Svetlana Boym points out that “The relationship between ‘Russian and Soviet’ is highly contested in the post-Soviet period. Extreme views of this relationship range from viewing the Soviet Union as ‘Russophobic’... to viewing the Soviet period as a brief episode in the history of the Russian empire.”<sup>5</sup>

While there are references to listening devices placed in the museum by the KGB and to the “worms” that have eaten (destroyed or sold off) the throne in the memorial hall of Peter the Great, there is only one fleeting glimpse of the Soviets. Red Army soldiers march across a darkened room for only a few seconds, but they are framed inbetween two static and respectively more permanent images: *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, both by Rembrandt. But there

is no commemoration of the sacrifices endured and produced by the Soviets: the image of the soldiers is immediately followed by the sound of Nazi aircraft which foreshadows the following scene, where we see a man making his own coffin in a bombed-out room of the Hermitage during the Germans’ 900-day siege of Leningrad. The siege is symbolized by coffins and empty picture frames, and it is referred to by the invisible persona as “a great sacrifice on the part of the people and the museum.”

The fact that this image of the Red Army travels between these two religious images—one of sacrifice and the other of the belated return (spiritual awakening) of the prodigal son—makes it seem more allegorical than historical. This shift between the allegorical (Old Testament) father(land) that is willing to sacrifice its son(s) and the wayward son who returns to the forgiving benevolent (New Testament) father(land) suggests both the end of an era of sacrifice and the return to a spiritualized fatherland (home or national identity). However, the placing of the image (of the Red Army) that seems to have no spiritual future next to religious images that have been interpreted as prophetic (prefiguration of Christ’s atonement and second coming) is enigmatic: it questions the boundaries between anonymous (visionless) secular sacrifice (to the state or to the people) and (priceless) iconic spiritual prophecy. Although fleeting, this sudden appearance of Red Army soldiers recalls not only the sacrifice of one million inhabitants of Leningrad during World War II, but also the sacrifice of the hundreds of thousands of nameless men and women it took to build and rebuild this monumental city. What is at stake here is not the political future of the nation-state—the invisible persona does not know what kind of state has preceded the disastrous Soviet one—but the Russian soul, as indicated in the very title of the film.<sup>6</sup>

Although construed as a “national liberation,” as Anatoly Khazanov argues, the break with the Soviet past has produced not one debate but many different ideologized interpretations of history, many of which have been accompanied by the desire to associate with the Russian imperial past.<sup>7</sup> The obsession in the 90s with finding the remains of Czar Nicholas II and his family, their interment in a proper site of resting, and the possible canonization of the murdered Romanovs by the Russian Orthodox Church—with the exception of the left-leaning Grand Duke Nicholas Mikhailovich—represents the impossible dream of returning Russia to its past greatness under the czars. But this discourse also establishes the Romanovs as the martyred victims of the Red Terror, cleansing them of their own terrible

acts.<sup>8</sup> As Gourgouris argues, nostalgia for the patria, or lost nation, is always utopian and always impossible: “The Nation is both museum site and ground of oblivion . . . where repression and the return of the repressed take place simultaneously.”<sup>9</sup>

*Russian Ark* honors, if not privileges, this nostalgic image of the czar cut adrift from any historical reality outside of the walls of the Winter Palace. The choice of Mikhail Glinka’s mazurka “Life for the Czar”—composed in the late nineteenth century to praise the czar and the Orthodox Russian people and played live by the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra during the spectacular finale of *Russian Ark*—not only reconstructs the last ball of Czar Nicholas II in 1913, but also connects the czar to the Russian soul, and to Russia’s current national identity (especially since Glinka’s “Patriotic Song” has become the new Russian national anthem). Upon entering the Memorial Hall of Peter the Great, the disembodied voice reflects on the ambiguity of such nostalgia: “Monarchies are not eternal, but we are free to dream away.”

Despite this awareness, the film recycles these self-constructed (and recollected) dream images of the czars who fancied themselves reformers, modernizers, westernizers who transformed Russia into one of the Great European Powers. While *Russian Ark* treats the past (the costumes, gestures, music, historical reenactments, etc.) with meticulous detail, it mimics the historically revised image of Imperial Russia, never once following those serfs (or servants) who paid the high price of the czars’ “enlightened” lifestyle. As Stanley Kauffman writes: “Except for the few modern visitors everyone in the film is in the social range from gentry up to royalty.” If this is really a “Russian” ark, he asks, “Where is there even a hint of Russia’s entirety?”<sup>10</sup> Maybe this is why the owner of the off-screen voice—which represents and defends Russia—is invisible.

As *Russian Ark* participates in mass amnesia—treating the Bolshevik Revolution as both a rupture with and an interruption of Russian history—it draws attention to the problems caused by such erasures and desperate attempts to scour the national archives (or treasures) in order to salvage or reinvent some form of legitimacy. But just what type of continuity does this single uninterrupted gaze establish? If this continuity is just a dream, to whom does this dream belong? Although the ark is called “Russkij” (of the people), Sokurov’s film demonstrates how the contents of the ark (both the priceless objects and the live pageantry) belong to another ark: that of the “Rossiikij” (the name of the great empire), which orients itself toward Europe. Kujundzić points out “that the dramatic tension of the



Eighteenth-century ladies

film pertains to the question of identification (and the Russian national identity) that lies in the fact that the space of commemoration relies also on artifacts that have nothing to do with Russia, but are entirely imported from the West, and thus, structurally from outside of this site of memory.”<sup>11</sup>

Even the art work featured in the film is selective, favoring enduring European representations of religious figures (Sts. Peter and Paul, St. John the Baptist, the Madonna, and a variety of angels), and mythological ones (Danaë, the Three Graces). The only depiction of a “lesser,” more “dated” figure is Frans Jansz van Mieris I’s *Lady in her Boudoir*. But this painting of a bourgeois lady, her handmaid, and her dog is accompanied by the disdainful comment (on the part of the European stranger who guides the camera to the painting): “. . . rags, a dog, eternal people. Live and go on living, you’ll outlive them all.” Yet the stranger seems to extend his scorn to the disembodied speaker, whom he growls at, giving him a contemptuous glance just prior to approaching the painting. This disembodied persona seems to belong not only to the Third Estate, but also to these eternal people whose presence can be seen in the modern (contemporary) scenes. Although not complete strangers, they are clearly visitors to, rather than inhabitants of, the ark.

In fact, the film reminds us that St. Petersburg itself was built as a Russian dream of Europe. Peter the Great moved the capital of Russia from Moscow to St. Petersburg, built a European-style city on a swamp, and collected artifacts, ideas, institutions, intellectuals, and artisans from Europe so as to westernize Russia. Even if the artisans and architects of the city were either foreigners imported from Europe (e.g., Bartolomeo Rastrelli, Carlo Rossi) or Russians influenced by the culture of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Enlightenment (all featured in the film), and the implementation of such reforms were, as the companion of the invisible persona

declares, “of the most primitive kind,” the voice tells us that “Petersburg is still a European city.” But as Michael Gordin argues, the Petrine reforms were designed less to enlighten the Russians than to establish political absolutism by enforcing Western court etiquette and a new social (aristocratic) class at the expense of the boyars, the Orthodox church, and ultimately, the lower classes.<sup>12</sup> What is copied from Europe is primarily the gesture of consolidating political power as exemplified by Louis XIV,<sup>13</sup> and secondarily, the international and domestic image of Russia—the appearance of Russia as European. While St. Petersburg (particularly the Hermitage) in its naissance was already a museum of the “old European masters,” it was on the other hand (as Sokurov suggests) an imagined city, the czars’ untimely dream of Italy or Europe that was designed not so much to copy Europe as to extend the borders of the map of Europe from the Elbe and the Julian Alps to the Ural mountains. As the Russian speaker tells us, “The czars were mostly Russophiles, but sometimes they dreamed of Italy.”

Although fascinated by the spectacle of power, the invisible speaker seems incapable not only of anchoring himself in this particular past, but also of understanding it. It is not until he encounters a kindred spirit, who appears to be just as lost and disoriented, that he seems to establish a point of reference. But this anchoring comes in the form of a tenuous, if not antagonistic, dialogue between the invisible persona and the onscreen stranger, whom this persona calls “Europe.” He is later identified by the persona’s (contemporary) friends as the “Marquis,” and in the last sequence of the film by the nineteenth-century spy (who shadows these visitors throughout the film) as the Marquis Astolphe de Custine—a French diplomat to Russia who wrote a critical travelogue (*La Russie en 1839*). Although this figure bears certain resemblances to the historical Custine—he is both awe-struck at the opulence and beauty of the czars’ possessions and also acerbically critical of their rule—he is more a composite (Russian) figure of Europe than an accurate depiction of Custine. William Johnson comments:

The most egregious difference is that [the *Russian Ark*’s Custine] accepts the imperial political system without question at the end, after taking part in the grand ball, and decides to stay in Russia, while the actual Marquis, who expected to admire a system without a representative government (his father and grandfather were guillotined in the Reign of Terror), was appalled by it, noting

the fear even among the nobility of expressing any kind of political or social criticism.<sup>14</sup>

*Russian Ark*, then, seems to reverse the Marquis’ attitude toward Russia.

It is in contrast to Europe (i.e., Custine) that the unseen persona becomes identified as Russian. Rather than delineating any essential differences between Europe and Russia, this dialogue enacts the process of othering. While “Europe” calls the invisible speaker his “Russian cicerone,” it is “Europe” who will guide Russia through the theater or dream of the imperial past, constructing his own version of history. Larry Wolff demonstrates how the construction of “Eastern Europe” as a category by representatives of the “Western Enlightenment” (in this case a French monarchist) secured both Europe’s own myth of Europe as the paradigm of progress and humanity, and the myth of the non-European as backward and boorish.<sup>15</sup> For Custine, Russia is the other against which Europe will define itself. Not only are Russians reduced to “talented copyists, because they don’t have ideas of their own,” but Russia (like Greece and the Balkans) are placed off Europe’s map. Custine responds to the Russian speaker’s awe at seeing Peter the Great, by remarking, “In Asia tyrants are adored. The more terrible the tyrant the more cherished is his memory; Alexander the Great, Timur, and your Peter the Great.”

The invisible persona is put in a position of defending Russians and Russian culture, but he also repeats Custine’s statements almost like an echo resounding from the walls of these huge rooms. For instance, when Custine (Europe) introduces the topic of nationalism into the dialogue, only to disregard “Russia’s national poet,” Aleksandr Pushkin, as “nothing special,” he adds, “I am sorry if I have offended your nationalist sympathies.” The invisible persona questioningly repeats, “What? . . . national . . . national sympathy?” But he does not react further. Instead of simply confronting European criticisms of the “East,” the film shows how Russia’s sniffing at the various figures of Europe is read by Europe as a slavish act of deference. By allowing the European stranger to assume a superior position, the Russian speaker subtly undermines it, showing that Europe’s identity is also an imaginary construction that is contingent on its others, and ironically, it is the Hermitage that houses and preserves the various dreams, memories, and histories of Europe.

Shifting from the framing of historic events and Russian pageantry to the details of various European art works, the film seems to relegate Russia to a series of



The Marquis de Custine  
commenting on art and history

live performances (history, theater, music, court rituals) and Europe to a collection of artifacts (paintings, sculptures, architectural features, artistic styles). The dialogue between the figures of Europe and Russia and their journey through the time and space of the Hermitage question such clear divisions, making the European's insistence on superiority look ridiculous (especially in contrast to the post-Soviet visitors whom the European encounters). Sokurov pokes fun at Custine, who seems to see his reflection everywhere—"Empire style everywhere"—and whose keen sense of smell does not go beyond the paint of the various European "Old Masters" he sniffs, or the odors (formaldehyde) that his own body exudes. Yet here he mistakes or projects his own stench onto (living) others. The film, however, does not clarify who is right. Is it the present that stinks of death (merely preserving itself on past glory) as the historical figure of the past thinks, or is it the burden of history that reeks of death and oppresses the modern visitors?

*Russian Ark* parodies not only Europe's proprietary attitude toward the art works featured in the film, but also what they represent. When Custine is introduced to the Russian persona's friends (Sokurov's real-life friends Lev Yeliseyev and Oleg Khmelnisky), he arrogantly asks them if they are interested in "beauty or just the imitation of it?" But as they lead Custine to Tintoretto's *The Nativity of St. John the Baptist*, it is clear that he is not interested in the painting's beauty (as are these two patrons of the museum), but only in what it represents in terms of French history. He comments, in fact, that Catherine the Great acquired the painting at a Paris auction of the Crozat Collection in 1772. Similarly, while overwhelmed by the beauty of Canova's

*Three Graces*, he notes that the sculpture was purchased by Czar Alexander I from Napoleon Bonaparte's wife in 1815. In opposition to Custine, the various Russian visitors to the museum (the famous ballet dancer Alla Osipenko, the blind sculptress Tamara Kurenkova, and the anonymous man who admires El Greco's *St. Peter and St. Paul*) develop their own relationship to the works of art independent of the sentiments of nationalism. However, the film constantly reminds us that Custine is many performances in one: he is at the same time Custine, a French diplomat, a European, and a stranger, but he is also a performance of biased European attitudes toward Russia. More importantly, he links this "live" performance of an untimely history to the haunting presence of those outside of time and geopolitical space.

"Europe," who is surprised to hear that he is speaking Russian, is in fact a prominent Russian stage actor (Sergei Donstov) acting the part of the Marquis ("Europe"). But this time, the Marquis de Custine does not enter the palace with a diplomatic entourage as we see with the Persian delegation—sent to persuade Czar Nicholas I not to go to war over the murder of Russian diplomats in Tehran—nor does he appear as stiff and staid as the other diplomats (as surely a French diplomat of the time would). Instead, he is an obvious parody of Europe—flamboyantly delivering French lines with a Russian body. When we first encounter this strange European, he is hovering behind the masquerade actors who greet the party guests, the officers and ladies in the first visual shot of the film. The Russian speaker encounters "Europe" only after passing through two groups of actors, confusing him to the point that he cannot distinguish theatrical performance from historical



The last ball

reenactment. He asks, “Can it be that this has all been staged for me? Am I expected to play a role?” He even asks this stranger, whom he now finds lurking in the hallway, “Is this all theater?”

Yet this allegorical figure of Europe will further extend the metaphor of theater to Russia itself: “Russia is like theater, how pretentious these people are. What actors! And those costumes!” *Russian Ark* draws attention to multiple layers of theatricality. On one level, St. Petersburg and the Winter Palace provide the stage for Russians to act as if they were European: on another level, this artificiality and pretentiousness seem to be imported to Russia from European court culture itself—the disguising of the violence of political and imperial power with etiquette and diplomacy. In addition, history, remembrance, and even the present—as for instance in the case of Osipenko, who acts (dances) out her relationship to Rembrandt’s *Danaë*—are played out as cameo performances. Finally, the film’s focus on theater draws attention to film as an artistic performance.

Although *Russian Ark* emphasizes theatricality, it doesn’t spin it out of control into random, disjointed acts that repeat, intersect, and dissolve into oblivion. Instead the film hinges all these disparate and fragmentary performances on the physical and historical map of the Hermitage and the Winter Palace. The trajectory of “Europe” and “Russia” does not seem to follow any order or chronology. As they move from room to room, they also move from the time of Peter the Great (early eighteenth century) to Catherine the Great (eighteenth century), to various periods in the nineteenth century, contemporary Petrograd, to the siege of Leningrad during WWII, and back to an older and more feeble Catherine the Great (in the late eighteenth century). What appears in chronological order are the various czars, from Peter the Great to Catherine the Great, Nicholas I, and Nicholas II. Each czar played a significant role in the history of the museum: Peter the Great not only founded the city, but also con-

structed the first incarnation of the Winter Palace and the museum, which was then a *Kunstammer*, library, and natural history museum for his Academy of Sciences. Catherine the Great was the founder of the Hermitage, and bought over 250 paintings in 1764 to begin the collection. Czar Nicholas I opened the New Hermitage in 1852 and provided “public” access to the museum. The reign of Nicholas II marks the end of the Hermitage’s double role as museum and home to the czars. It also marks the end of the epoch of Petrine reforms, and what the film presents as the splitting of Russia from Europe during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The film mimics this historical progression by moving upwards from the original darkness through the dark quarters of Peter the Great to the brilliantly colorful climactic ball given by Nicholas II, only to descend once again into the darkened waters of the Neva. This movement from the small provincial courtrooms of Peter the Great to the opulent high-ceilinged ballrooms of Czar Nicholas I’s court and Czar Nicholas II’s gala ballroom also marks the growth of the city and the Empire’s geopolitical importance with respect to Europe. As opposed to the fluid movement of the camera, which follows the rhythm of the dancers, musicians, and various guests at the ball, the images of Peter I are tightly framed. He is seen through windows and doorways. Often the ceiling can be seen in the frame, giving the images a claustrophobic effect. This image alludes to Pushkin’s famous characterization of St. Petersburg as “opening a window onto Europe” in his poem “The Bronze Horseman” (“*Mednyi Vsadnik*,” 1833). Ironically, here it is the figure of Europe and the Russian speaker who apprehensively peek through the window at Peter I—but a Peter stripped of the trappings of enlightened despotism. Through these windows we see Peter physically bully his wife (Catherine I) and humiliate one of his ministers by forcing him to the ground and making him crawl out of his presence. This scene enacts the hypocrisy of the Petrine reforms that used public humiliations and state intrusion to introduce Russians into “polite society.” The window also serves as a barrier to keep Peter at a distance. He is treated as an enigma.<sup>16</sup> The man who, in popular culture, taught the Russians to enjoy themselves—popular folklore tells us that he threw wild, drunken parties and demonstrated extraordinary sexual prowess—is also the man who, as Custine reminds the Russian speaker, ordered his own son’s execution.

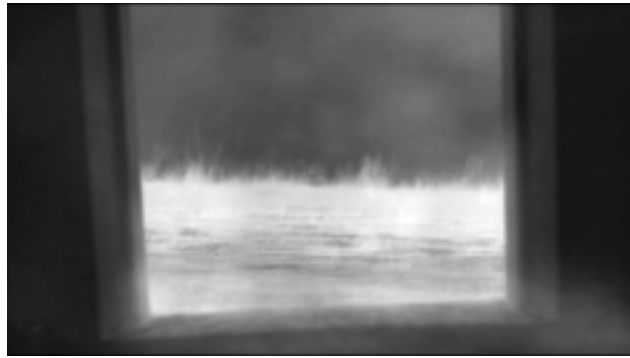
Boym writes:

For Russian thinkers, the “window to the West” turned into a magic mirror in which they

saw mostly their own reflections. Conversely, Russia was an exotic playground for Western travelers, “the land of the firebird” or tyranny in the 19th century, and the land of possible communist utopia, or alternatively of the totalitarian gulag.<sup>17</sup>

But the film is not uncritical of the Russian gaze through a European window at itself. The city, like the very foundations of the Hermitage and the history of the St. Petersburg czars, is built on top of this boorish figure of Peter the Great. Catherine, the great patron of the arts who launched this Russian ark, is presented less boorishly. First she appears watching a rather garish theatrical play (presumably her own production) that mixes classical Roman and Russian figures with masquerade and fantasy characters. Alone among the czars she has a second appearance, yet in her reappearance she is a somewhat pathetic figure, hiding behind a column as the children of the court play blindman’s bluff. This time, she is almost unrecognizable to the disembodied visitor. But both times she is shown running off—first, she claims, “to take a piss,” while the other time she disappears into the cold white-and-grey world outside the palace. As the film progresses and the art, as Custine claims, “gets better and better,” the czars appear less active, almost ridiculously immobile.

Nicholas I walks down two steps so as to indicate that he is receiving the address of the Persian ambassador, and then turns to his minister to indicate that the words the minister will read are his own. It is almost as if he has become a European clockwork figurine. In this scene it is the camera that becomes more fluid, moving through the tableau of a historical festival, giving this image a three-dimensional feel. The contrast between cinematic fluidity and figural stasis is repeated in the scene of Nicholas II presiding at the head of an intimate family breakfast in full ceremonial dress. But already by the time we follow Czarina Alexandra and her sister Elizabeth (the “white nun” who was also killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918) down the hallway, there is a foreboding specter of doom looming beyond the walls of the Winter Palace.<sup>18</sup> When Alexandra comes into focus, it is as if we hear her thoughts: “You are always there watching me.” Later she will ask Elizabeth if she hears the gunshots, and tell her that she feels the presence of someone watching. Of course there are many spectators watching—not only Europe, but Russia and the camera itself. As the camera pulls away from the family, they seem to bid it farewell. The invisible speaker will echo this gesture as he bids farewell to Europe at the top of the Jordan stairs on his descent into the future—



The waters of the Neva

World War I, the Revolution, Stalinism, WWII, the Cold War and its anti-climactic finale.

At this point of closure, the last image of the czars, the invisible speaker loses sight of his European accomplice, following first the white nun and then the awkward yet ever-present spy into the ballroom. The European becomes increasingly more embroiled in the spectacle of the past, and less engaged in the antagonistic dialogue with the invisible Russian speaker. This disengagement produces a feeling of weightlessness. The camera and the speaker appear to be more disembodied, gliding through the ballroom, floating above the orchestra and around the dance floor. Yet, just as the camera and the speaker seem to be swept away by the music and the festivities, there is a loss of grounding that will leave the invisible speaker with a sense of melancholy and disorientation once the music stops. As he approaches “Europe” for the last time he remarks, “I lost you,” and repeats, “Have I lost you?” as if to indicate that not only is he lost, but so is this era of opulence, splendor, and power. When he suggests to “Europe,” “Let’s go . . . forward,” his European companion, visibly saddened, responds by asking, “What will we find there?” The future to which the Russian speaker refers is not the Russian Revolution, but an unknown future beyond the Soviet period.

Rather than remaining with “Europe” like an artifact fixed within a historical frame, the Russian speaker follows the moving spectacle down the stairs, but he becomes one with the camera that moves between and beyond these historical figures, only to float through this window to Europe and onto the desolate waters of the Neva. Like Pushkin’s “The Bronze Horseman,” the film takes a sudden twist from the monumental heights of the ark (island) of the czar to the surface of the Neva.<sup>19</sup> It is here over the water that the disembodied speaker reflects, “Too bad you are not here with me, you would understand everything; look, the sea is all around and we are destined to sail forever . . . to live forever.” While



the film closes with another nebulous image—the darkened winter sky of St. Petersburg over the frozen waters of the Neva—it recalls these anonymous “eternal people” who seem to sail undetected between the borders of Asia and Europe, within the borders of someone else’s dreams of an unforeseeable future and an impossible past, between the secularism of Enlightenment thought and the return of religion, lost somewhere in the exchange of ideology for international currency. Sokurov seems to be as unwilling to identify these floating people as he is to anchor them on one bank or the other. What he does emphasize is the rift between the aesthetics of Russia’s monumental idols, history, and politics of empire and the murky, imageless (if not invisible) eternal people over whom all these spectacular images pass.

#### NOTES

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1. Etienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe?* trans. James Swenson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004). See Chapter 1, “At the Borders of Europe.”
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983) and Stathis Gourouris, *Dream Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
3. Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* (one of the first texts written in vulgar idiom) begins: “In mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai in una selva oscura/che la diritta vita era smarrita/ . . . Perdete ogni speranza o voi che entrate.”
4. Dragan Kujundzić, “After ‘After’: The Arkive Fever of Alexander Sokurov,” *Art Margins*, Spring 2003, www.artmargins.com/content/cineview/kujundzic/html. This essay is also republished in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 21, no. 3 (July-September 2004): 219-39. Although the film has been widely reviewed, there has been little serious analysis. Kujundzić’s piece not only stands out amongst the literature, but also sets a high bar for further examination of the film.
5. Svetlana Boym, “From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia,” *Representations* 49 (Winter 1995): 145.
6. For a reading of the notion of spirit and nation as a performance of sacred, see Raoul Eshelman’s “Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* and the End of Postmodernism,” *Art Margins*, Summer 2003, www.artmargins.com/content/cineview/eshelman/html.
7. Anatoly M. Khazanov, “Ethnic Nationalism in the Russian Federation,” *Dædalus*, vol. 126, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 130-38.
8. Ironically, it was Peter the Great who curtailed the power of the Orthodox Church in his Spiritual Regulations of 1721 and subordinated the church to a secular government bureau, the Holy Synod.
9. Gourouris, *Dream Nation*, 45.
10. Stanley Kauffman, “Remembrances,” *New Republic* (December 16, 2002): 26.
11. Kujundzić, “After ‘After.’”
12. Michael Gordin, “The Importation of Being Ernest: The Early St. Petersburg Academy of Science,” *Isis* 91 (2000): 16. Gordin observes: “Peter’s court was Western only in the sense that it was patterned after the Baroque courts of late 16th century Italy: it centered on ceremony, emblems, and panegyrics in a manner not seen in Western Europe since the golden age of Florence. This ‘cultural lag time’ has been attributed to the fact that Russia has imported its courtly culture from German states, which were themselves behind France, Italy and England.” He argues, “The purpose of Peter’s reforms were to create a new class of the Russian ‘elite,’ which primarily entailed education . . . borrowed from the Berlin Academy of Science, but despite Peter’s gestures toward social mobility, this civilizing process was not meant to go all the way down the social ladder. . . . He merely wanted it to appear estate-blind, in effect these reforms were meant to form a new class formation” (11-13). See also Marc Raetz, “Seventeenth Century Europe in Eighteenth Century Russia,” *Slavic Review* 41 (1982): 611-19.
13. See the work of Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility: The Civilizing Process*, vol. 2, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982) and *The Court Society*, trans. Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
14. William Johnson, “Russian Ark,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Winter 2003-04): 48.
15. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
16. Peter I is presented as somewhat of a stranger himself. While he humiliates one of his nobles, we hear the invisible speaker say, “He was obviously a foreigner, why would he be so rude otherwise,” seemingly in reference to the European figure. Of course many of the czars were “foreigners,” in that like all European aristocracy, they came from various noble houses (in this case, mainly German and Prussian) outside of their own empire. But here we are asked to think about Peter’s distaste for all things Russian, his brutal treatment of Russian nobility, the Orthodox Church, and his attraction to, if not identification with, Europe. If Peter is the keel to this Russian ark, then what does it mean to be Russian?
17. Boym, “From the Russian Soul,” 149.
18. The film replaces the controversial spiritual advisor of Aleksandra, Grigorii Rasputin, with Elizabeth, so as to further legitimize the royal house.
19. “The Bronze Horseman” juxtaposes the great monuments and feats of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great to a lowly bureaucratic functionary, Yevgeny, who takes refuge under the statue of Peter the Great during the great flood of 1824. The poem shifts from the praise of the city to the story of Yevgeny going mad once he realizes that his sweetheart has perished during the flood, and it follows his madness, anger, death, and burial in a pauper’s (unmarked) grave.

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**ABSTRACT** This paper analyzes how Aleksandr Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* treats the complex relationship of Russia and Europe, considering their history not as a fact but as a poetic construction. The film demonstrates how nostalgia for an imaginary past often produces various forms of historical erasure and national myths of origin.