

“After the Deluge: *Russian Ark* and the (Ab)uses of History,” *NewsNet: News of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2003), 17-22.

by
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The critical and commercial success of Aleksandr Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002) – an art house movie that has been voted one of the official selections at the most prestigious international film festivals and that has made over a million dollars in the United States alone¹ – necessitates a thoughtful response from American Slavic studies professionals in our roles both as teachers and as public intellectuals. After all, any movie that features cameos by Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Pushkin, Nicholas II and Alexandra, and that enlists Marquis de Custine as the official tour guide to three hundred years of Russian history and more than thirty rooms of the Hermitage, simply cries out for a discussion of its historical and ideological implications. *Russian Ark* provides a perfect teaching opportunity for Slavic studies specialists, if for no other reason than the fact that even educated movie-going audiences have left the theater bewildered by its incomprehensibility, annoyed by its pretentiousness, and swept away by its pageantry, frequently all at the same time. Our goal in this self-avowedly polemical piece is to open up a critical discussion about Sokurov’s film, which we see as a significant milestone in the on-going attempt to define Russian national identity vis-à-vis the West.

We say “critical discussion” because while *Russian Ark* is undoubtedly a technological *tour de force* – a single, uninterrupted 90-minute shot, featuring paintings and lavish period costumes from the State Hermitage Museum, mellifluous music by the Mariinskii Theater Orchestra, and a cast of nearly a thousand extras – this stunning visual

spectacle can easily blind audiences to the film's troubling political and ideological messages. The gist of these messages is perfectly summarized in the film's title, which evokes the biblical story of the Flood in order to suggest that after the "deluge" of the twentieth century, it is a *Russian* ark (the Hermitage) that remains afloat on the waters of time to carry on the mission of restoring "culture" to a world chastised by the wrath of God. Although this reading of the film may seem a bit farfetched – especially to people who believe that movies are simply pure entertainment – it is an interpretation that echoes the bombast of Sokurov's open letter to American audiences, which appeared on the Landmark Theatres' website soon after the release of the film in the US.² In that letter, Sokurov himself urged American audiences to rise to the challenge presented by his movie and to realize that

“the time has again come for people to build arks and that there must be no delay, and that the Russians have already built their Ark, but not just for themselves – they will take all with them, they will save all, because neither Rembrandt, nor El Greco, nor Stasov, nor Raphael, nor Guarenghi nor Rastrelli will allow an ark such as this to disappear or people to die. Those that will be together with them [...] will definitely go to heaven.”

But as the tone of the rest of the letter makes clear, Sokurov is certain that his voice will be that of a lone prophet crying in the wilderness. For, according to this self-appointed prophet, Americans “are a very busy, very proud people,” who live in “comfort and prosperity,” but who “have little interest in what is vitally important to you [the film]” – namely, “your native Hermitage, ... our God.” However, it is neither Americans' ignorance of Russian history nor their supposed youthful “wish” to lead “world civilization” that prevents them from seeing the point of the movie. It is, rather, “their own hardheartedness” – a loaded biblical term that was used in the New Testament to characterize Jews who refused to recognize the divinity of Jesus, but which in this

context serves to brand American audiences as unredeemable cultural philistines. And *Russian Ark* is Sokurov's rod of chastisement.

Although we can see the potential pitfalls of aiming a historical critique at an art film, especially one as well executed as *Russian Ark*, we submit that in this case one should not distinguish between the artist and the art. For Sokurov's controversial political agenda (as revealed in his open letter) is built into the very structure of the film. Thus, the director's use of the single, continuous shot – arguably the main reason why American movie critics urged audiences to go see *Russian Ark*³ – is a technological achievement that is inseparable from the movie's ideological content. It is Sokurov's attempt to realize Andrei Tarkovskii's (his teacher's) vision of the inherent equation between “real time” and “reel time.”⁴ Although Sokurov's movie flits through three hundred years of Russian history in an hour and a half of reel time, it aims to tap into and to illuminate the deeper, real history of modern Russia. The documentary quality of the hand-held camera presents a narrative of Russian history in which the Tsars are doomed by forces beyond their control. So, for example, the breathtaking scene in which the ball-goers descend the Jordan Staircase into oblivion – lined up row by row, like in some kind of Russian historical iconostasis – masterfully evokes the tragic fate of the gloriously dressed and doomed passengers of the *Titanic*. However, the sheer cinematic beauty of this final scene should not blind us to the fact that the passengers aboard this ill-fated voyage actually had a hand in helping the Russian ship of state go down into the maelstrom of the twentieth century. Treating them as pitiful victims, or what is worse, as martyrs in a nostalgic and sentimentalized vision that exists only in the partisan

interpretations of nationalist mythmakers, deprives the real historical figures depicted in the movie of the agency that they most surely possessed.

Not only does this tendentious approach remove all personal responsibility from the Russian Imperial elites who helped to unleash the “deluge” of war and revolution, but, more insidiously, it naturalizes these myths, so as to make them seem like that is the way things really were. Sokurov’s single shot manufactures continuities in a narrative that pointedly excludes (almost) the entire Soviet period and that harkens back to a nostalgic vision of Nicholas II, the last Romanov tsar, as the saintly forgiving father – not as the “Bloody Nicholas” whose troops fired upon unarmed demonstrators calling for an end to an unjust war, economic exploitation, and bureaucratic arbitrariness. Missing from Sokurov’s version of late imperial Russian history is the infamous Grigorii Rasputin, a wild-eyed peasant monk who was popularly associated with the jingoistic and mystical excesses that helped to discredit the Romanovs in 1917. In their attempt to whitewash the reign of Nicholas II, the scriptwriters chose to replace the infamous Grigorii Rasputin, the “Mad Monk” of the Russian Revolution, with Grand Duchess Elizabeth, the “White Nun” of the *Russian Ark*. Their decision to highlight the spiritual advisory role of Alexandra’s sister, who took the veil after the assassination of her husband in 1905 and who died at the hands of the Bolsheviks, along with the rest of the Russian royal family, only corroborates a nostalgic nationalist narrative that presents the last Romanovs as nothing less than saintly victims.⁵ In effect, the movie’s trick photography offers a powerful justification of the controversial canonization of the “martyred” Nicholas II, who was granted the title of “passion bearer” (the lowest rung in

the pantheon of Eastern Orthodox saints) in August 2000. And sainthood, like visionary filmmaking, brooks no arguments.

Like in Sokurov's open letter to the American public, the ideological premise of *Russian Ark* is based on an unspoken, but nevertheless quite clear juxtaposition between Western "civilization" and Russian "culture"⁶ – a juxtaposition that is played out in the running verbal battles between the movie's unseen narrator (Sokurov) and his guide: Marquis Astolphe de Custine, a French Catholic aristocrat, whose international bestseller, *Russia in 1839*, sparked a continuing debate about Russia's *Sonderweg*. The filmmaker's choice of museum guide reflects the movie's overarching concern with the issue of Russian national identity, particularly as expressed in the evolving and frequently troubled relationship between Russia and the West: Is Russia a part of Europe or Asia? Do the Russians have a "national character"? And if so, can an analysis of this character explain what has frequently been described as Russia's imperialist policies, its authoritarian political system, and its servile reliance on foreign models? Following in the footsteps of such early nineteenth-century Catholic thinkers as Joseph de Maistre, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Petr Chaadaev (whose seminal "Philosophical Letters" he read in their original, French version),⁷ Custine did not hesitate to place Russia on the other side of the great cultural divide between European civilization and Asian barbarism. Of course, Custine's depiction of a servile yet aggressive Russian "national character" was very typical of the Orientalist milieu in which it was produced and thus should not surprise us. Nor should anyone be surprised by the fact that Custine's Russophobic book was rediscovered during the height of the Cold War and hailed as a prophetic work by none other than George F. Kennan, the American diplomat responsible for formulating

the policy of “containment” of the Soviet Union.⁸ What is less well known, and much more surprising, is the hold that Custine’s unflattering description of Russia has had (and continues to have) on Russians themselves. Indeed, *Russian Ark* may be seen as Sokurov’s attempt to exorcize Custine’s ghost from the Russian national consciousness. By turning Custine into a foil for his own nationalist views, particularly about Russian achievements in the sphere of “high art,” Sokurov aims to co-opt and thereby tame this unruly spirit.⁹

The character of the effete French marquis embodies a surface brilliance that serves to demonstrate the self-satisfied banality and decadence of a civilization in decline. Custine’s sense of moral, aesthetic, and political superiority is challenged at every point of his seemingly pointless stroll through the Hermitage, the “Russian Ark” that saved the Great Masters of world art during the “deluge” of the 20th century. In this context, the scene in which the Marquis is confronted by an angry coffin-maker in a war-ravaged Hermitage – an oblique reference to the 900-day siege of Leningrad and to the heroism of those museum workers, who succeeded in saving the art from being sacked and looted by the Nazis¹⁰ – is much more than a disturbing aside in a lavish costume drama. It is, rather, a visual illustration of the nationalist trope that posits a distinction between a nation willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in the name of cultural treasures and universal values (*dukhovnye tsennosti*) and a “civilized” country that simply lets the “Huns” take over its glittering world capital without a struggle. As such, this scene relies on the well-worn tactic of using the suffering inflicted upon the Russian people as a badge of their cultural and spiritual superiority.¹¹ Harking back to the arguments of such eminent nineteenth-century *Kulturträger* as Fedor Dostoyevsky, Sokurov presents

Russia as the Christ of modern nations and as the only hope of salvation for a materialist, bourgeois, and decadent West.¹²

Since “high art” has been, and continues to be, one of the official modes of discourse of Russian nationalism, the question of Russia’s perennial indebtedness to Western models – the main theme of Custine’s running commentary and the leitmotiv of the film – is particularly troublesome to a New Russian patriot such as Sokurov.¹³ What has Russia really contributed to Western, let alone world civilization? What makes a work of art distinctively Russian if the artist continues to rely on Western representational norms and techniques? While Sokurov does not appear to take a particular side in these debates, his repeated interjections to Custine’s ramblings do suggest that Russia’s true cultural achievement lies primarily in the fields of literature (Pushkin) and music (Glinka and Tchaikovsky), rather than in painting or architecture. The movie as a whole offers the possibility that Russia’s primary contribution to the world of visual arts is in fact the Hermitage itself, the “Ark” that contains the highest points of western achievement in fine arts. And as the chronicler of the Ark, Sokurov partakes of that glory. Indeed, *Russian Ark* may be seen as his assertion that a contemporary Russian artist can rely on Western models (for example, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*) and technology (high-definition video camera and the foreign expert to operate it) and still produce a work of striking originality.¹⁴ And because Sokurov is still trapped within the confines of a Romantic aesthetic, according to which nationalism and originality find their most sublime expression in the figure of the national genius – whether a Pushkin or a Goethe – he rather immodestly positions himself (and his work) as the embodiment of the genius of contemporary Russia.

Russian Ark not only aspires to the status of a modern masterpiece, but also makes some of its strongest points by directing our attention to and seeking to co-opt the work of the Old Masters. Among many other images, Sokurov focuses our attention on three masterpieces of world painting, two by Rembrandt and one by the Greek-born Spanish Baroque artist, El Greco. The latter's *Peter and Paul* offers a fitting backdrop for a heated discussion about greatness, religion, and Russia's fate in the grand scheme of things. In a scene that has puzzled many viewers, we see the Marquis scolding a young man for treating this intense religious painting – which was most likely intended as a devotional object to inspire meditation – purely as an aesthetic object. The vehemence with which Custine browbeats the youth suggests that there is more to the scene than a dysfunctional lesson in art appreciation. Reading between the lines of the exchange between Custine and the youth, the modern moviegoer is prodded to pay attention to the religious significance of the subject matter of this painting. For these are not just any saints, but the patron saints of both Peter the Great and his city. Sokurov suggests that Peter was not a just another monarch, but a ruler whose creation fits into the largest scheme possible – the story of the world's redemption. To see Peter merely as the despot at the beginning of the movie is to miss the redemptive significance of what he himself described as his “paradise” – the city of St. Peter. The monarch's presence weighs heavily on the whole movie, even though he appears for only a couple of minutes at the beginning of *Russian Ark*. Peter the Great is the “rock” on which the city, the building of the Hermitage, and also the film is based, but a rock that weighs heavily around the necks of any Russian nationalist. The prominence of the Petrine theme helps to explain why *Russian Ark* had its official Russian premiere in May 2003, at the tercentenary of St.

Petersburg, which celebrated what President Putin described as “the glory of Russia, and the provenance of that glory.”¹⁵

The choice of the two works by Rembrandt – the “Prodigal Son” and “Danaë” – as nonpareils of Western achievement picks up on both the religious and the Petrine themes introduced with El Greco’s *Peter and Paul*. On the one hand, these paintings recall Peter’s fascination with things Dutch as a model of European cultural achievement. One only needs to remember Peter’s work on the docks of Zaandam and his intention to build a new, European commercial port in order to comprehend the immense symbolic significance of Dutch culture to the building of Peter’s “paradise.” It is only appropriate, therefore, that Russia’s “Ark” (like all public buildings in the Russian Federation) should fly a tricolor flag modeled on that of Holland and that the modern Hermitage – that paragon of the marriage between culture and commerce – should own and exhibit several paintings by *the Dutch master*. As with El Greco’s *Peter and Paul*, however, the Petrine theme cannot be understood apart from the religious issues raised by Sokurov’s vision of Russian history. The camera’s long and languorous shots of the “Prodigal Son,” a painting that embodies the idea of redemption through repentance, suggests that the contemporary religious revival fostered by the Russian political elite signals a more fundamental and wide ranging return to the Lord. Anyone who has witnessed the spectacle of President Putin’s inauguration – which included a controversial appearance by Patriarch Alexy II, in flagrant (if as yet only ceremonial) violation of the constitutional separation of church and state – will see that Russia is no longer the land of the godless Communists.

In this context, even the painting of “Danaë” – a mythological subject based on the story of a virgin (Danaë) impregnated by a disembodied deity (Zeus, disguised in the form of a golden shower), only to give birth to a heroic dragon slayer (Perseus) – takes on a new, more politicized meaning. Although this subject seems far removed from assertions of Russian nationalism and Russian Orthodoxy, the implicit references to the Virgin Mary and to St. George (and thereby, respectively, to Christ the Redeemer and Russian statehood), suggest that this painting was purposefully chosen to support Sokurov’s overall agenda. “Danaë” stands out for another reason: this work was attacked in 1985 by a deranged visitor, who slashed the painting across the middle and then doused it with acid. Conservators in the Hermitage worked for twelve years to restore the painting and it was placed back on exhibit only in 1997. The Herculean efforts to restore this painting were documented in an exhibition entitled “Danaë: The Fate of Rembrandt’s Masterpiece” (October 1997-November 1998) and have become part of the allure and lore of this painting. In the context of the ideological thrust of the movie, the inclusion of “Danaë” seems to suggest that while the painting was a Dutch achievement, its restoration/preservation can most certainly be touted as a Russian achievement. This, for Sokurov, is precisely the kind of thankless burden that would be undertaken by the people chosen by God Himself to preserve Western civilization.

Slavic specialists have a role to play in transforming this kind of self-pitying and self-aggrandizing national pride into a frank discussion about the (ab)uses of history in *Russian Ark*. As Sokurov’s patronizing letter to his imaginary American audience makes perfectly clear, the movie’s historical mystifications, while aesthetically stunning and technologically innovative, were never intended to further the cause of promoting

education about Russia – the only real solution to the problem of fear and misunderstanding between the two countries. In that sense, the mutually contradictory opinions of Custine and Sokurov are actually two sides of the same coin. The Russophobia that was at the heart of Custine’s book, and which resonated so profoundly among a Western public already predisposed to regard the military interventionism of the government of Nicholas I with alarm, was, to a large extent, based on a deliberate misunderstanding of Russia. That misunderstanding was grounded upon a fundamental ignorance of the real and increasingly more complicated domestic situation, one that witnessed the rise of both a critical intelligentsia and a coterie of enlightened bureaucrats who would eventually carry out the “Great Reforms” that would result in the emancipation of the serfs and the introduction of a western-based judicial system. Custine simply had no interest in these historical developments because, like all good nationalists, he was seeking to chronicle an unchanging, “eternal” Russia. And if this made bad history, at least it did provide the grounds for a nineteenth-century French best seller.

Similarly, all the technological razzle-dazzle of *Russian Ark* contributes as much to the ignorance about Russia that Sokurov deplors among the American viewing public as the “Potemkin villages” that Custine encountered at the court of Nicholas I. This ignorance, in turn, feed into the mistrust of both sides in an increasingly polarized stand off between the representatives of philistinism (decadent, materialist West) and culture (materially poor but spiritually rich Russia) – a confrontation in which Sokurov takes on the role of the self-appointed prophet of Russia’s God-ordained cultural mission. By presenting Russia as a land that, in the words of the nineteenth-century poet Fedor

Tiutchev, “cannot be grasped intellectually or measured by a common standard [...], but must simply be believed in,”¹⁶ *Russian Ark* only further propagates the cycle of mythmaking and fear that has characterized relations between Russia and the West. At the end of this cinematic spectacle, we are still left with the same old dichotomies between East and West, modern and backward, civilized and barbarous. Far from offering salvation to the world, *Russian Ark* turns out to carry the same load of Russian nationalism that helped to unleash the flood of the 20th century.

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¹ “Film Box Office Wrap,” *Daily Variety* (17 December 2002); *ibid.*, (7 January 2003); Ol’ga Shervud, “V Severnoi Amerike ‘Russkii kovcheg’ operezhaet ‘Vlastelina Kolets,’” *Rosbalt* (22 February 2003); *idem.*, “Russkii kovcheg: delo i den’gi,” *Russkii zhurnal/Kul’tura/Cinema* (26 February 2003); Oleg Sul’kin, “Kovcheg-millioner,” *Novoe russkoe slovo* (11 March 2003); *idem.*, “Kovcheg-millioner: Fil’m Sokurova b’et rekordy amerikanskikh artkhauzov,” *Izvestiia* (18 March 2003), cited on the official movie website <<http://www.russianark.spb.ru/rus/press>>. Additional promotional information can also be found on the website of the American distributor of *Russian Ark*, <<http://www.wellspring.com/russianark>>.

² For the text of Sokurov’s open letter to the American public, see “Sailing *Russian Ark* to the New World” <http://www.landmarktheatres.com/Stories/ark_frame.html>.

³ For a survey of the enthusiastic critical reception of the movie in the United States, see <<http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/russianark>>.

⁴ Jane Knox-Voina explained Sokurov’s indebtedness to Tarkovskii at a roundtable discussion of *Russian Ark* sponsored by the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, 2 May 2003.

⁵ Thanks to Mary Giles for her research into the identity of the “White Nun.”

⁶ For an insightful discussion of the historical origins of the opposition between “civilization” (*Zivilisation*) and “culture” (*Kultur*), see Nortbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1982), 3-34.

⁷ For a discussion of Custine’s intellectual debts, see the preface by Pierre Nora in *Lettres de Russie: La Russie en 1839*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris, 1975), 15-17; and, more generally, Anka Muhlstein, *A Taste for Freedom: The Life of Astolphe de Custine*, trans. Teresa Waugh (New York, 1999). For Custine’s knowledge of Chaadaev’s philosophical views, see Nora, *ibid.*, 402-403.

⁸ George F. Kennan, *The Marquis de Custine and his Russia in 1839* (Princeton, 1971).

⁹ This attempt to “domesticate” Custine may explain why the movie ends with the Marquis’ refusal to leave the Hermitage.

¹⁰ The desire make a movie about the siege of Leningrad is, reputedly, the real reason why Sokurov wanted to make *Russian Ark*. Personal communication to the authors from Stuart Gibson, head of the “Friends of the Hermitage” Foundation, 24 April 2003.

¹¹ Viacheslav P’etsukh, “Ot Kiustina do nashikh dnei,” *Vestnik Evropy* 3 (2001), 124-143, esp. 126, 128. Thanks to Musya Glants for this reference.

¹² For a powerful articulation of this vision, see F. M. Dostoevskii, “Pushkin: A Sketch” [1880], in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, ed. March Raeff (New York, 1966), 288-300. Thanks to Barney Schwalberg for reminding us of the pertinence of this text.

¹³ “High art” is a term that has conventionally been applied to such forms of cultural production as belles-lettres, painting, architecture, and music; more recently it has also come to include art-house cinema.

¹⁴ Sokurov’s cameraman was Tillman Büttner, of *Run Lola Run* fame. For Sokurov’s acknowledged indebtedness to Hitchcock and other masters of world cinema, see the list of “single-take movies” on the *Russian Ark* website <http://www.russianark.spb.ru/rus/cinema_plans.html>.

¹⁵ President Vladimir Putin, Chairman of the Government Commission for the 300th Anniversary of St. Petersburg, quoted on the official “Jubilee” website <<http://www.spb300.com/english>>.

¹⁶ Fedor Tiutchev, “Umom Rossiiu ne poniat” [1866] in *Izbrannoe* (Rostov-on-the Don, 1996), reprinted online at <<http://www.litera.ru/stixiya/authors/tyutchev/umom-rossiyu-ne.html>>