

RUSSIAN ARK



Most reviews of the film *Russian Ark* by Aleksandr Sokurov have tended to concentrate on the director's technical feat of shooting an entire one and a half hour film in a single shot. Anne Brennan dives deeper into the currents of history, memory, loss and oblivion that flow beneath the surface of the film

A central scene in *Russian Ark* involves the ghost of a 19th-century Marquis and a young contemporary visitor to the Hermitage Museum, as they contemplate a painting by the artist El Greco. Their exchange in front of the artwork provokes the question: can the remnants of history transcend their specific cultural moment or do all people and things fall victim to the past, destined to inhabit human memory and imagination only as ghosts?

This question of whether culture can embody shared meaning in the face of the dislocations of time and history is one of *Russian Ark's* central themes. It is hard to think of a better location for such an exploration than the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia. Part of the Winter Palace, the Hermitage houses a collection of more than 2.8 million artefacts amassed over more than 200 years. One figure estimates that it would take nine years to simply glance at every one of the objects in the collection.

In its historic scope and sheer size, then, the Hermitage's collection can be read as a detailed document of European civilisation. Director Aleksandr Sokurov uses the Hermitage as a central device in unfolding a debate about Russian national identity and, whilst most of the specifically Russian references are not available to an Australian audience, his engagement with the Hermitage as a museum is challenging and absorbing.

Russian Ark constructs a world in which the buildings and objects are solid and its human 'inhabitants', whether living or dead, are strangely insubstantial. This chimerical quality is compounded by the fact that our companions throughout the spaces of the museum are two ghosts: the truculent French Marquis and another whom we never see, but whose disembodied voice we hear, engaging in dialogue with the Marquis.

The identity of the voice is unclear. It appears to be connected to the 'eye' of the camera, and, significantly, it is identified in the credits as 'the Spy'. One possible reading is that the Spy is Sokurov himself, but another possibility is that the camera is linked to the viewing eye of the audience, so that we, too, are rendered ghostly, 'haunting' the museum's spaces. Whichever way we interpret the presence of the Spy, it seems clear that Sokurov is proposing a central paradox about human memory — that humanity, the living, active agent of culture, is mortal, and that what survives us is the mute, material residue of human activity.

There is no traditional narrative in *Russian Ark*, and events are shaped purely by the trajectory the camera follows through the museum. Whilst the continuous take and the single viewpoint of the camera combine to create a sense of events unfolding in real time, the reality is that the camera's odyssey through the museum is a



highly mediated one, choreographed and rehearsed in such a way that the viewer is drawn through a complex, non-linear temporal space, in which multiple pasts co-exist and appear to obey their own mysterious directions and scripts.

Indeed, Sokurov appears to conceive of the museum as a kind of theatre of memory, and the film is redolent with theatrical images and artifices. At intervals during the film, the ghostly visitors are accosted by masked players and, in one scene, they gatecrash a masque, an elaborate form of early musical theatre from which opera developed.

The masque is being presented for Catherine the Great but we do not see it, only the edifice of its theatrical devices. We enter backstage, blundering through the clunky 18th-century special effects machinery before gingerly skirting the edge of the stage to witness the real spectacle — the Empress's pleasure in the piece and her urgently expressed desire to pee.

These constantly reiterated theatrical metaphors suggest that for Sokurov the past is a construct, a spectacle that we create in the present, but whose meanings and resonances inevitably elude us, since the passage of time erases experience, leaving us with only fragments to recreate a sense of where we have come from.

The final scenes of the film draw the viewer into the last moments of the last ball ever to be held in the Imperial

Ballroom in 1913. As the ball draws to an end, the guests spill slowly down the Hermitage's magnificent Jordan Staircase. As the camera moves through it, the crowd seems to swell and expand, encompassing not just the doomed guests of Tsar Nicholas II, but all those who have participated in the historical and cultural past of the Winter Palace. Our privileged vantage point in the present lends a tremendous poignancy to the scene; in the vital, glittering flow of this human crowd, we know not only that our companions are mortal, but how they will meet their end.

As the camera moves out and beyond the doors of the palace, the scene dissolves into the dark, wintry waters of the Neva River, an ominous metaphor for the oblivion that time brings, perhaps. Or maybe there is something more consoling to be read in this image of St Petersburg's immortal river. Perhaps we can read it as a metaphor for the unknowability of the future. Or as an image of the ceaseless flow of human activity; the only sure bulwark against oblivion. This is the implication at work in the final words of the Spy: '... we are surrounded by the sea ... we are destined to sail forever, to live forever'.

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