**Russian Ark** (Русский ковчег) is a 2002 movie by Russian director Alexander Sokurov. It was filmed using a single 90-minute Steadicam sequence shot.

An unnamed narrator, unseen by the audience and voiced by the director, wanders through the Winter Palace (now the main building of Russian State Hermitage Museum) in Saint Petersburg. The narrator implies that he has died and is a ghost drifting through the palace. In each room, he encounters various real and fictional people from various time periods in the city's three-hundred-year history. He is accompanied by a companion, "the European" (played by Sergei Dreiden), who represents the nineteenth-century traveller the Marquis de Custine, and who is visible to the audience. The fourth wall is repeatedly broken and re-erected; at times the narrator-director and the companion interact freely with the other performers, and at other times, they go completely unnoticed.

The film begins on a winter's day with the arrival by horse drawn carriage of a small party of men and women to a minor side entrance of the Winter Palace. The narrator, whose eyes are always our point of view, meets one member of this party, "the European", and follows him through numerous rooms of the Palace. As each room is entered, we find ourselves in a different period of Russian history, but not in chronological order.

The film shows, among other things, the spectacular presentation of operas and plays in the era of Catherine the Great; a formal court proceeding in which Tsar Nicholas I is offered a formal apology by the Shah of Iran for the death of Alexander Griboedov, an ambassador; the idyllic family life of Tsar Nicholas II's children; the formal changing of the Palace Guard; the museum's director whispering the need to make repairs during the rule of Joseph Stalin; and a desperate Leningrader making his own coffin during the 900-day siege of the city in World War II.

The climax of the film is a grand ball, featuring music by Glinka, with many hundreds of participants in spectacular period costume, and a full orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev, followed by a long final exit with a crowd down the Grand Staircase of the palace.

The narrator then leaves the building through a side exit and in a digitally enhanced sequence, the building is represented as an ark preserving Russian culture, and floating in the sea.

**Production**

The film displays 33 rooms of the museum, which are filled with a cast of over 2,000 actors. Russian Ark was recorded in uncompressed high definition video using a Sony HDW-F900. The information was not recorded compressed to tape as usual, but uncompressed onto a hard disk which could hold 100 minutes. Four attempts were made to complete the shot; the first three had to be interrupted due to technical faults, but the fourth attempt was completed successfully. The shot was executed by Tilman Büttner the Director of Photography/Steadicam Operator. The Camera Supervisors on the film were Bernd Fischer and Anatoli Radionov.[1] The director later drew a distinction between the whole project and the achievements of Büttner by 'rejecting',[2] by letter,[3] Büttner's nomination for a European Film Academy award.

**Background**

The narrator's guide, referred to as "the European" in the film, is based on the Marquis de Custine, who visited Russia in 1839 and wrote a widely-read book about his visit. A few biographical elements from Custine's life are shown in the film. Like the European, the Marquis' mother was friends with the Italian sculptor Canova and he himself was very religious. Throughout his book, La Russie en 1839, Custine mocks Russian civilization as a thin veneer of Europe on an Asiatic soul; in the film, this is why the European makes comments about Russia being a theater and the people he meets being actors. The Marquis' family fortune came from a porcelain works, hence the European's interest in the Sèvres porcelain waiting for the diplomatic reception. At the end of the film, which depicts the last imperial ball in 1913, the European appears to accept Russia as a European nation.

**Critical reception**

While the movie was not a huge commercial success, it was almost universally praised by film critics. Roger Ebert wrote about the film: "Apart from anything else, this is one of the best-sustained ideas I have ever seen on the screen....{T}he effect of the unbroken flow of images (experimented with in the past by directors like Hitchcock and Max Ophüls) is uncanny. If cinema is sometimes dreamlike, then every edit is an awakening. Russian Ark spins a daydream made of centuries."[4]