

The Remaining Second World: Sokurov and *Russian Ark*

by Benjamin Halligan



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“Sir, [the Russians] have two expressions (I am not speaking of the lackeys who have only one; I am speaking of the nobles). When they come through here on the way to Europe they have a gay, free, happy air. They are like horses turned to pasture, like birds who have flown the cage – men, women, young, old, all are as happy as school children on a holiday. The same people, on their return have long, gloomy, tormented faces; they have a worried look. Their conversation is brief and their speech abrupt. I have concluded from this difference that a country which one leaves with so much joy and returns to with so much regret is a bad country.”

“Perhaps you are right,” I reply, “but your observations prove that the Russians are not as deceptive as one paints them. I thought they were more inscrutable.”

– The Marquis de Custine, 1839 (1)

There is a perverse, contrarian impulse at the heart of Aleksandr Sokurov's new film, *Russkij Kovcheg* (*Russian Ark*, 2002). Initially this is manifested in the way in which *Russian Ark* is patently unlike all other films. But even this base level of difference is only one aspect of the experience of seeing *Russian Ark* – which is the experience of encountering something genuinely new in itself. Such high claims need qualification. Although *Russian Ark* should level a sense of shame on name filmmakers and their bloated “event films” – now more than ever just more of the same old thing – *Russian Ark* is no self-styled *magnum opus*. In fact, Sokurov seems to have been a little dismissive of it. In a letter rejecting the European Film Academy (EFA) nomination of his cameraman, Tilman Büttner, on the grounds that the film was a collective piece of work guided by the overall vision of the sole director (2), he commented mostly on its disappointments:

... we managed to accomplish only a third of the planned artistic tasks. As a principal mistake I regard the decision to re-record the soundtrack in Germany... that was a political decision of the German producers, resulting in certain compromises of artistic nature. Lack of funds has led to the inevitability of frequent alterations in the script. There were 4000 characters in my initial plan, later we had to reduce this number by half. In the end, as a result of economical difficulties and for safety reasons, only 1000 people played in the film

(3).

And, elsewhere, on its limitations:

... the large number of professional errors that Tilman Büttner committed during the shoot. The complexity of the task that was set, no doubt, was beyond the professional ability of the steadicam operator because, suddenly, he was confronted by the distant outer horizons of his profession (4).

The EFA's singling out of Büttner seems to matter in the context of the reception of the film since, for Sokurov,

I understand very well the great significance of our production for the history and practice of professional cinema. Therefore the moral aspect of the estimation of such film is of special importance (5).

So what did the one thousand under Sokurov and his team achieve, that even the reception of the film needs addressing? Further qualifications are required. Sokurov rejects an application of the label of “revolution[ary]” to his work, preferring instead to be understood as one concerned with “evolution” (6). This occurs in the constant attempt to achieve a balance of all elements – a cinematic equivalent to the kind of aesthetic totality that Georg Lukács found in the literature of the latter half of the 19th century. And, like Lukács, Sokurov, a self-confessed 'traditionalist' and 'conservative,' speaks disparagingly of the whole project of modernism. The resultant aesthetic totality, written across a 'flattened' perspective typical of Sokurov, is something that has been referred to as “Sokurov's philharmonic cinematography” (7). It should be noted too that Sokurov refers to himself not as a “Russian director,” but as a “St Petersburg director” and once claimed “I myself experience history as a Eurasian; Russia occupies a separate place, being neither Europe nor Asia” (8). So *Russian Ark*, anecdotally, has from the outset a slightly askew perspective on its subject matter. This subject matter, here, is considered from the point of view of a West European and atheist in the first half of February, 2003.

Russian Ark represents the realisation of a kind of Bazinian utopian text. The film consists of one long take, lasting over 90 minutes and constantly mobile, through innumerable rooms in the State Hermitage Museum, with extras so numerous and so sumptuous in their appearance that one is tempted to name Sergei Bondarchuk as well as Andrei Tarkovsky as a formative influence on Sokurov. The film traverses time too – some 300 years of Russian history, re-enacted as a fantastic, continual stream of overlapping flashbacks. The shifts in era are unable to rely on the usual signifiers (a cut or a fade or a dissolve). Thus the same character is seen as young and old within the linear, real-time space of minutes, and characters long dead converse with the contemporary (the Hermitage's current director, Mikhail Piotrovsky, for example).

The long take covers almost two kilometres, which may prove to be a shock to viewers of Sokurov's previous international release, *Mat i Syn (Mother and Son, 1997)*, which could be said to cover only metres. In terms of the history of filmmaking, it is a notable achievement. However, the perverse and contrarian impulse is this:



Sokurov has violated the true object of André Bazin's understanding of the long take as a technique of film *par excellence*. Initially, the violation seems to have occurred over the issue of time. Bazin felt that the camera, left to run, would capture a truth in the reality it recorded – that reality, under unblinking interrogation by the camera, as Bazin had it, would yield up its essence. Bazin cites the films of Robert Flaherty in this regard, a filmmaker who has exerted a formative influence on Sokurov. This notion underscores the work of documentarists of the Jean Rouch/D. A. Pennebaker/Nick Broomfield school, who understood that such a “truth” could therefore be found in the inessential as much as the essential, if it was approached in a correct and sympathetic way – one that subordinated all techniques of films and filming to the reality it sought to capture. What better way to achieve this than through the elimination of *the* technique of manipulation from the language of film: montage? The result is the long take, or a preferential option for the use of the long take.



Mother and Son

For fiction filmmakers, the long take created the context in which the ultimate “reality effect” could be edged towards – an uninterrupted flow of real-time occurrences within the fictional context of the film. For Tarkovsky, the notion of a film form tied to the experiential aspect of the narratives of his films became the understanding that time itself “pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive” (9) and that this was an artistic and historical necessity (10). Sokurov aligns himself with the achievements in this tradition, achievements that he finds most pointedly in Tarkovsky's work:

... the greatest directors of our time were able to discover only one feature of cinematic art which they could develop to a certain degree: time. The passage of time was the main object of investigation for their profession. And when this majestic time proves to be, in Bergman and Antonioni, even more strongly dependent on dramatic technique, then in Tarkovsky and Bresson a specifically cinematographic concept of time appears, born of genuinely visual methods and so able to exist as a true cinematographic reality – one which cannot be reproduced by any other medium. Tarkovsky is unquestionably engaged in the struggle for the birth of a real cinema (11).

Sokurov's 'time' is formally intact. Invariably, therefore, one marvels at the organisation behind the film, the marshalling and choreographing (often literally) of so many events within the confines of the actual running time of the film, the seeming effortlessness of the camera as it glides through a theatre performance, a vast diplomatic reception, a ball with full orchestra, those hundreds upon hundreds of costumed extras, waiting and primed for the precise moment of the camera's arrival, and then the final exit (surely one of the most astonishing crowd scenes ever filmed?). Yet this audacious and reckless challenging of fate in the filmmaking process (12) is also a full realisation of Sokurov's filmmaking tendencies; one of his regular actors, Leonid Mozgovi, claims “Sokurov is afraid of repetitions, afraid that everything could be dried. He is also afraid of rehearsals. He thinks that people slide into cliché when repeating” (13). In this way, through the use of what is effectively a single set-up, the film achieves a freshness and a sense of the unexpected just around the corner, making for a frisson of reality in this real-time timelessness. But there is a counter-current to this too, and one that will also surprise viewers of *Mother and Son*. Whereas that film was physically intimate, close to the texture of skin of the two characters, and the physical connection, the touch, between the living and the dying, *Russian Ark*

is again the opposite. Of the idea of 'touch,' Sokurov elsewhere says:

No word can elicit the deep, inner, specifically human reaction that a human being's touch can. In this affective sense, the body is a blessed reality, because it is only through this sensory feeling of the human body, its warmth, that one gets an idea of the soul's location or an answer from it (14).

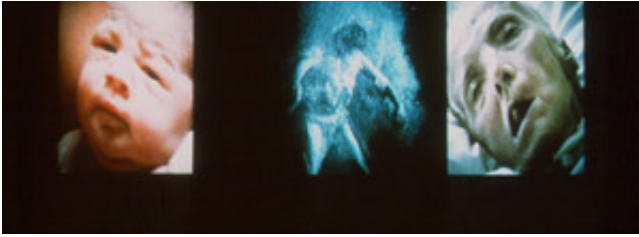


The two main protagonists of *Russian Ark* are perhaps dead souls, and are seemingly mostly invisible – although one of them, the Marquis de Custine, is granted use of a visible and palpable body (to the other characters) in some sequences. Consequently, the overall impression conveyed by the film is that of coldness – a film devoid of touch – and so the frisson of reality that Sokurov achieves only serves to work against those things it formally indicated. Now it is the dead that remind us that we are living (one character comments that dead authors weep for joy when

their books are reprinted); the form, founded on reality, is used to present its very opposite, an unreality – a necropolis in the manner of the late Polish theatre practitioner, Tadeusz Kantor. Likewise, the long take has been brutally wrenched away from any notion of a narrative dramatically analogous to the ticking seconds of the film (which is the typical use of the long take – consider Flaherty's patient, fishing Eskimos, for example). Sokurov's reality-effect form *par excellence* is applied to anything but a recognisable reality – and this is the violation of the Bazinian maxim. Indeed, it is *this* that is given dramatic analogy; the two protagonist-narrators remain disorientated almost throughout (they initially think they're in the Vatican), trying to make sense of the things they see, the people they encounter and the reality they find themselves in. Compared to Jean-Luc Godard's experiments 'against' the long take in *Made in U.S.A* (1966), which could be said to be 'revolutionary' in a way typical for the *Nouvelle Vague* at that point (he defaces the Bazinian notion of the long take by using it on a highly stylised 'pop' reality), Sokurov's long take does indeed seem to be 'evolutionary.'

In narrative terms, Sokurov neither uses the long take to court boredom as a dramatic effect, nor to heighten the drama. There is no as-it-happens sense beneath drawn-out sequences. Another example of such a shunning of this classical thematic use of the long take is in Sokurov's earlier *Krug Vtoroj* (*The Second Circle*, 1990); long long takes, framing partially obscured views into the room in which the “action” (usually waiting in itself) is, or is about to, take place. The irony of *The Second Circle* is that it concerned a death and the formal preparations required after it. The corpse, in a way the central character of the film, acts like as a kind of black hole – time has ceased for it, yet it still sucks in time, emptying out the rest of the film of anything but the most rudimentary ways to note the passing of time. As in *The Second Circle*, there is no great “event” to the fictional narrative of *Russian Ark*. The waiting isn't for any discernible reason. The closest Sokurov comes to shaping a *raison d'être* worthy of his long take is in the grand exit from the 1913 ball at the close of the film, but this is pervaded by a sense of melancholy, of an event

which is now past, and of the Golden Age sighing its last breath before the onset of war



Nantes Triptych

(anticipated earlier in a freezing ante-chamber, its sole occupant ranting about coffins) and Stalinism (a darkened alcove and discussion of phone-tapping). Even installation art that has utilised a sense of time in a similar fashion has placed a palpable event at its centre; the slow revealing of the island in the mist in Mark Lewis' *Algonquin Park, September 2001* and *Algonquin Park, Early March 2002*, or Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych* (two major events – his wife giving birth and his mother dying), for example. This has thrown a number of critics, expecting a build-up (of sorts... at the very least!) to an encountering of the key people or key moments, a delirious climax only possible if, it is presumed, enshrined in a long take.

Such critical bafflement also greeted Sokurov's first two films in his as-yet-incomplete “power” trilogy – the neurotic Hitler of *Molokh* (*Moloch*, 1999) and the dying Lenin of *Telets* (*Taurus*, 2001). Here, it wasn't so much a case of seeing the human behind the persona, more a hope of a hint of the persona behind the human (Hitler's rants are stunningly banal, ditto Lenin's uneventful death, with only a cow for company). Such banalities are also present in *Russian Ark* (at one point the Marquis comments “Good writers always have beautiful hair”) and point the way to the master of the theatrical precedent of the long take, and another artist preoccupied with elegies for the doomed bourgeoisie: Anton Chekhov. The conversations of *Russian Ark* are ruminative and philosophical and the preoccupations of the film are sketchy at best. The central speech, the explanation, the big scene are always missing, and one is forced to “read between the lines.” But the plasticity of Sokurov's imagery – which leaves the viewer almost physically peering “into” the foggy hues of the aqua *Taurus*, the desert red-orange of *Dni Zatmeniya* (*Days of the Eclipse*, 1988), the gloomy foliage fuzz of *Mother and Son* – makes even the lines difficult to discern.

The key to Sokurov's use of the long take is his metaphysical perspective. This is realised in *Russian Ark* to the extent that, had Sokurov been able to make the film when he first considered “every detail of a film, which could be a one-shot,” “[a]bout 15 years ago” (15) it could have been banned (along with the majority of his output then) on the grounds of “dialectical spiritualism.” Our point of contact, and entry into the ghost world of the film, is via an anonymous, off-camera commentator (in fact, Sokurov himself), providing a running commentary. This device has been used previously, notably in Sokurov's semi-documentaries *Elégie de la Traversée* (*Elegy of a Voyage*, 2001) and *Robert: Schastlivaya Zhizn* (*Hubert Robert: A Fortunate Life*, 1996) – the latter, also made in association with the Hermitage Museum, very much a forerunner to *Russian Ark*. But the commentator of *Russian Ark* is not locked into any recognisable present, as with these two previous films. When asked by the Marquis about the nature of (presumably) the current Russian government, the unseen narrator confesses that he's not sure. It's partly a joke, but also reflects the disorientation of the characters, who have lost their fixed bearings on a recognisable reality. The film opens with a vague indication that we are in an afterlife. Against a black screen, the voice-over begins:

*I open my eyes and I see nothing.
I only remember there was some accident.
Everyone ran for safety as best they could.
I just can't remember what happened to me.*

It is a distant echo of the beginning of that most notable European journey through the afterlife, Dante's Inferno:

*Midway along the journey of our life
I awoke to find myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered off from the straight path.*

*How hard it is to tell what it was like,
this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),*

a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer (16).

Sokurov and his co-writers retain Dante's disorientation and feeling of the ominous, but replace the distinctively medieval fear of being lost, finding oneself outside civilisation, with a particularly contemporary fear of sudden and unexpected catastrophe – Chernobyl, Kursk, or perhaps a nuclear disaster or strike, bringing to mind the visions of the end of the world in Tarkovsky's *Offret (The Sacrifice)*, 1986).

From this unearthly point-of-view, everything begins to change. The perspective is one of both hindsight and foreknowledge, and the predecessor is Hamlet's father. Shakespeare's Denmark, in the tradition of the Old Testament, is a land in which all things go awry because of the unholy regal union at the heart of the state, as Horatio explains in Act 1, Scene 1:

*In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.*

Hamlet's murdered father appears either side of this speech (actually appears – spooking the night guards at the beginning of the play – unlike, arguably, Macbeth's visions) to goad Hamlet into action. Yet revenge barely seems sufficient motivation for the tortured soul. Would Hamlet's late father be so concerned about his widow's marriage to his brother were it not for an ability to see what would come of the union – an ability to see, from the perspective of the afterlife, the future history of the state of Denmark? This is the reason for his being summoned up from the death – to avert that which is to come. Hamlet, when he combines his perspective (that of the living) with his father's (that of the dead) comes to understand the historical imperatives that then drive him to revenge, even at the cost of his own life: another form of dialectical spiritualism.

It is from this perspective, the eye of the dead beheld by the eye of the living, that *Russian Ark* occurs. So why this vision, now, in 2003? What does the film posit is 'at stake'?

In *Hubert Robert: A Fortunate Life*, Sokurov presented a meditation on the life and work of the minor French painter (1733-1808). The Russian context which Sokurov wraps around this is particularly illuminating. Robert's landscapes, typically the ruins of once-mighty civilisations, were popular with the Russian



bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. They represented the logical conclusion to a period of industrial-civil modernisation that Russia had yet to enter into; Robert reassured them that the seeds of its own destruction were already embedded in the new era, and that nature will ultimately prevail, overrunning and dwarfing even the most ambitious of human enterprises. Alexandra Tuchinskaya describes this affinity on the part of the Russian bourgeoisie as “apocalyptic impulses...already present in the culture and social life of the Golden Age of Russia.” (17). They are present in Chekhov too – the distant sound of the breaking string in *The Cherry Orchard*, for example. They were also present in the German Romantic sensibility, and in J.M.W. Turner's paintings (two more formative points of reference for Sokurov); did H.G. Wells have them in mind as he described the destruction of the Martians in *War of the Worlds*, or the wreckage of ancient empires of the future in *The Time Machine*? For Sokurov, again



The Fountains (painting by Hubert Robert)

commentating on the film's soundtrack, Hubert's work is an instrument for a healthy *fin-de-siècle* sensibility:

The ruins of villas or palaces, castles, bridges, ancient vaults appear one by one before my eyes, like dreams; ghostly landscapes with grey trees...

In the natural death of a work of architecture, there is no awfulness, only melancholy.

Ruins can be looked at endlessly and this undoubtedly cures one of arrogance.

Russian Ark revises this Russia-Europe contextualisation (18). Here, the Marquis, another Frenchman, is called back from the dead, formaldehyde-fresh (as observed by a couple of characters) to act as our guide through Russian history. He is an apt figure; his scandalous travel writings on Tsarist Russia of 1839 provide a solid paper qualification for the task. In the flesh, however, he is slightly inappropriate, a grumpy cynic, vain, a little senile and with a touch of Nosferatu about him, but a good conversationalist, an informed aesthete and graceful dancer. The historical Marquis was an aristocrat and diplomat, but foremost a connoisseur for whom history, travel and art were delectable vices to be sampled continually, alongside others outside the academy – he fell from grace after an ill-advised attempt to solicit a group of soldiers resulted in his being beaten and robbed, and the publicity destroyed his career and status. His family died, perhaps of shame, and the Marquis reinvented himself as a writer and proto-Queer. This tension between high art and low culture resonates in the film and lends it a very keen sense of the physical encounter with the Hermitage; at one point the Marquis greedily inhales the smell of the ancient oils of an Old Master. Nor are world-weariness and superficiality necessarily bad qualities with which to penetrate the cloud of unknowing that exists between the European sensibility and, as it used to be called, the 'Russian soul,' and to short-circuit those feelings of being overwhelmed upon finding oneself in a vast art gallery.

The Marquis is Eurocentric, yet chastises the Russians for their having looked to European traditions (to Italian painting, to German music) to formulate their own culture:

Why do you find it necessary to embrace European culture? For what reason? Why borrow

also Europe's mistakes?

Later, Sokurov answers back:

You Europeans are democrats who mourn Monarchy.

For Sokurov the European-Russian relationship has been a constant preoccupation. In his written recollections on Tarkovsky, Sokurov notes:

In their souls all Russians are people who 'clear paths through the forests...' Russia is the land of inspiration and illumination. Europe is the domain of disciplined intellect (19).

The reception of Sokurov's films in the West over the last few years has partly confirmed this dichotomy; his asceticism is seen to hark back to an era when Russian art was one of moral gravitas and purpose, unlike its frivolous and experimental European counterpart. *Russian Ark* marks the first sustained consideration of this preoccupation – and it could not be more timely.

Structurally, rather than metaphysically, we, West Europeans, see the off-screen narrator, a tentative Russian, viewing his own history, embodied in the Hermitage, itself founded for European art, through the eyes of the Marquis, a West European. It is an inclusive loop, but no one is quite at home. This is a familiar feeling – and one that piqued the historical Marquis' curiosity. It mirrors the now-commonplace thrusting together of different nationalities that typifies bourgeois European business, the arts, higher education and politics – in short, to paraphrase the Marquis's observations, the experience of those who are happy to leave, sad to return, and find all the others a little less inscrutable with every encounter.

So, again, why this vision, now, in 2003?

Sokurov's theme, despite the leisurely formal qualities of its delivery in *Russian Ark*, is no longer something for gentle ruminations. Now is the time to work to redefine Europe, and with an understanding of, and along the lines of, what each country and culture can lend to the others. In this context, Sokurov's voiced confession that he isn't sure about the nature of the current Russian government can be understood for the quip that it most certainly is. Perhaps this process is unstoppable. The willingness to adjust sensibilities has occurred at the level of the general populations, generating a feeling of European fraternity that has surprised governments, the media and historians. The counterculture, particularly the 1990s dance scene and the drug Ecstasy, cannot be ruled out of any understanding of how this process of evolving empathy came about. More recently such unification has occurred over shared feelings of apprehension towards the current Washington administration, and a distrust of compliant European governments in relation to it. So with every sign of deference to the White House made by the so-called “New Europe,” an indication of the opposite is achieved: we are all in the “Eurozone” – and perhaps this bond transcends thinking over regional differences of foreign policy. The active assumption that it doesn't may well set the scene for the next “big surprise” inflicted on disoriented European governments. This sense of unification was apparent in former Czech president Vaclav Havel's farewell speech on 2 February. He was keen to



acknowledge that *the* measure of his presidency was in the taking of his country from the dying days of the East Bloc to the dawn of potential EU membership (whereas for many this was *the* indication of the limitations of Havel's project and nationalist-based resistance).

So, for we now-besieged and beleaguered Europeans, there is only one real question of urgent importance: how to achieve complete EU hegemony via further expansion in the first instance, with the ultimate goal of an EU-founded entity that includes Russia. At the end of his analysis of the events of 11 September 2001, which evolved across the subsequent 12 months (an article, then revised, then turned into a book), Slavoj Žižek concludes by citing such a consolidation of “the remaining Second World” as an essential bulwark to neo-imperialism:

... if the emancipatory legacy of Europe is to survive, we should take the September 11 fiasco as the last warning that time is running out, that Europe should move quickly to assert itself as an autonomous ideological, political and economic force, with its own priorities. It is a unified Europe, not Third World resistance to American imperialism, that is the only feasible counterpoint to the USA and China as the two global superpowers... the Third World cannot generate a strong enough resistance to the ideology of the American Dream; in the present constellation, it is only Europe which can do it. The true opposition today is not the one between the First World and the Third World, but the one between the whole of the First and the Third World (the American global Empire and its colonies) and the remaining Second World (Europe) (20).

Perhaps the history of Europe in the 20th century is one that works in a perverse, contrarian way in this regard; the very disregard for the boundaries once created, protected and enforced in the name of sovereign defence and economic isolationism now becomes a potential geopolitical strength. And we have our own 20th century chronicle of death to remind us of the importance of living. Nor is this Sokurovian-like perspective so unique – I myself have been there, and so can speak with authority on Sokurov's *coup de théâtre*; that it is the living half of life that is disorientating, not the dead half.

Late one summer night in 1986, walking along the baked mud paths running through the fields in the Mostar countryside, in a country that passed on only weeks ago, Yugoslavia, a friend and I decided that we were hopelessly, wretchedly lost. This was during a chaotic summer holiday's excursion across Central Europe, taking advantage of the welcome that, inexplicably, always greeted British students. The plan of travel was plotted in the months before with my friends. I recall maps being drawn in school text books, times and dates scheduled for meetings in towns and villages across the entire continent, contact information disseminated. The ready availability of booze and cigarettes in the East Bloc (useful when under 16) and the cheap trains in Yugoslavia (this was during a period when train fare was reduced to a token amount, so as to stimulate the faltering economy) would help fuel and facilitate our picaresque travels, as would the Western goods we brought with us, to bribe anyone getting in the way. The cheap trains turned out to be somewhere between the train journey in *Dr Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965) and a 24-hour mobile party, the rowdy bar carriage spilling over into surrounding carriages – here a typically idiosyncratic joy of East Bloc travel, but later I would remember it as foreshadowing the expulsion of entire populations some ten years on. That night we had decided to walk back to our *pensione* and, disorientated by the 60 percent proof *slivos* that local farmers had plied us with, found ourselves in the middle of vast rural plains. A large pack of wild dogs gathered and

followed us. The pack grew in size and seemed to slowly edge closer, silent and undoubtedly hungry. I began noting the nearby trees, in case we needed to make a dash for it, and as we walked on and on into the night, an air of total disorientation descended.

*I awoke to find myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered off from the straight path.*

Then, unexpectedly, we stumbled on a tarmac road. This, we would follow. And, after only a dozen minutes, we heard a vehicle approaching. Headlights cut through the darkness (it wasn't a moonlit night, and the area was bereft of electric light) and, as I watched, I saw – a vision? A hallucination? It was something that simply did not compute: a red, double-decker London bus loomed out of the shadows and ground to a halt besides us. And, just as one would on the King's Road, we jumped onto the open platform at the rear of the bus, and on it sped. Inside, London adverts were plastered to the walls. We took our seats. No-one else was on board, and the driver was obscured by the cage. It seemed to me that we had died, perhaps the dogs had suddenly sprung on us, and that this was the bus to Hell – a place where the author, at 15, most certainly deserved to be. Appropriate, too: what else would Satan use as a taster of Eternal Damnation than an exact recreation of the London public transport system? But the sense of being lost before gave way to a calmness. Reality was too extraordinary to react to – one has to accept it.




The landscape became familiar and soon we spotted a road that lead to the *pensione*. We alighted and the bus sped off as mysteriously as it had arrived. I was, in fact, alive, and we collapsed into our beds and slept. Like Horatio and Barnardo in Act One, Scene One of *Hamlet*, I was unable to dismiss the vision of the double-decker – it had been witnessed by my friend as well as me. So the next morning, trying to square the bizarre events of the previous night, I asked about the buses. The answer: the Yugoslav government had bought a number to ferry farmers back home through the night during the harvest season. I hadn't, after all, been wandering in the realm of the dead. But I feel a kinship with those who talk of their near-death experiences, those who watch the films of Jean Cocteau, and the world of *Russian Ark*.

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 12. There is an account of the making of the film in Geoffrey Macnab, "Palace in Wonderland," *Sight and Sound*, August 2002, British Film Institute, pp. 20-22. A series of interviews with the makers of *Russian Ark*, and details of the filmmaking process and technology, can be found here: <http://www.russianark.spb.ru/eng/interview.html>. Accessed February 2003. ▲
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18. *Hubert Robert: A Fortunate Life* also gives an approximation of a reverse angle shot to the final image of Russian Ark. Here, it is the Hermitage seen from across the water. 
 19. Aleksandr Sokurov, "Death, The Banal Leveller (On Tarkovsky)," p. 64. 
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