

[The Empire Strikes Back - Sokurov Takes Revenge on de Custine](#)



Film & Video

Ulrich Schmid (Frankfurt/M.)

Wednesday, 30 July 2003 16:56

Sokurov is a specialist in analyzing totalitarian ideologies-he proposed visual interpretations of Hitler (*Molokh*, 1999) and Lenin (Taurus, 2000). These films are the first half of a tetralogy on dictators of the 20th century. (Rumour has it that his next project will deal with Mao Tse Dong).

Russian Ark does not fit at all into this series. This breathtaking movie seems not to analyze but to produce ideology. It is a dream phantasy with a narrator who owns Sokurov's voice and the eye of the camera.

This eye (which is in Nabokov's homophony also an I) is led by Marquis de Custine through the space of Russian imperial history. The Hermitage is a chosen place where power and art meet congenially. The title metaphor of the "Ark" suggests that Russian culture survived the Soviet Deluge in the imperial refugium of the Winter Palais.

Who is Custine in this film? Sokurov designs him as a vampire. The iconographic allusions are clear enough-Custine wears a black suit and spreads his long fingers like Murnau's Nosferatu.

Custine is dead and so is his artistic taste: He prefers *natures mortes* painted by Flemish masters and he has no sense of the beauties of Pushkin's verse. In one word Sokurov's Marquis de Custine is the ugly incarnation of Western arrogance and contempt for Russian culture.

A psychoanalytic approach may clarify the ambivalent relation between the dreaming narrator and Custine. Custine represents a demonic force within the narrator's own soul. He can be interpreted as the ever threatening fear of the Russian artist not to be able to meet Western standards of art.

This reading is most evident in a scene where de Custine shows his own book *La Russie en 1839* to the narrator and tells him that rather than himself, the narrator is the author of the book.

The whole movie, then, can be seen as a fight against the complex of inferiority of the Russian artist. Sokurov performs a kind of exorcism: The anaemic French diplomat who sucks the blood from the vital body of Russia must be overcome.

At the end, the Western vampire is defeated not with a wooden peg in his chest, but by the sheer force of Russian imperial culture. During the triumphal ball scene (the orchestra plays Glinka), Custine decides to stay within the space of Russian imperial art; he remains inside the Ark. The narrator then leaves the Hermitage and continues his artistic creation after the catastrophe.

A dominant role in this last scene is attributed to Valery Gergiev, the acclaimed director of the Mariinsky theatre in St. Petersburg. The camera focuses various times on this vital and

charismatic man who directs not only his orchestra but the fate of Russia. Sokurov leaves no doubt that Gergiev is the new Noah who enacts Russian culture anew in the 21th century.

Sokurov's *Russian Ark* deploys completely different artistic means than Nikita Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia* (1998). But in their ideological substratum both movies are comparable: They invert the traditional cliché of the irrational Russian and redirect this reproach to Western Europe.

The clue to both films lies in the figures of two Western madmen: The English Inventor (Richard Harris) in Mikhalkov and the morbid Marquis in Sokurov attack the innermost center of Russian culture: The Siberian woods and the splendid Imperium.

Russian Ark may be understood as a kind of visual manifesto. The Hermitage is a kind of nutshell of Russian culture which will unfold in a splendid future. Using the metaphoric religious language of the film, this point can be put as follows: There is only one Holy Russia, and Valery Gergiev is its prophet.

Ulrich Schmid (ulrich.schmid@unibas.ch)

See also the article [Roundtable on Alexander Sokurov's film "Russian Ark"](#).