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This issue reflects the variety of views and approaches to the problem of tolerant relations in a society. The problem of tolerance is considered from the point of view of psychologists, sociologists, social workers, educators and cultural workers.

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«The logic of the Long Take» and the Art Margins
Roundtable: The simulation of historical time
in Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark

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Art is entering the time of the injunction, as assertions of ideology can hardly be posed without posing the problem of the representation and proposing boundaries, limits, thresholds of tolerance. Nothing, especially art, is said to be outside the claims to truth made by the declarative definitions of the ideological position, and for those who practice one or another of the many forms of art, discussions about the boundaries of the representation are disturbing as they most often take place from positions of power far from the boundaries, the margins, all the manifold variables that comprise the social environment and individual volition of the artist and the volatile energies charged in the making of the work of art. The discourse of culture, whether it calls itself film theory, art history, or literary criticism, needs an object against which its own identity can be constituted and its project of the narration of historical structures authenticated. This object, the artwork, thus interpreted, is mobilized in the interest of one or another claim to truth, and the terms of its activation as such, when these terms involve the suppression of the materiality of the artwork, need continually to be carefully considered.

Without attention to the politics of cultural interpretation, the integrity of the category of the political is itself threatened, and political philosophy is worth defending in a time of intensifying territorial and predatory wars and the revival of ethnic and state nationalisms without which one country cannot make war against another, nor suppress internal opposition. Attention to the materiality of the artwork, which in the sphere of the cinema would include «avant-garde practices which foreground frame, surface, montage,

and other cinematic codes or materials, including sound, flicker, and special effects» (qtd. in Byg 166) participates in this defense by challenging abstractions that reduce the artwork to the condition of formula and function among assignments of usefulness and value. The ontology of the work of art, its very being, develops from its passage through contemporary and imminent sites of production, or what used to be called the influence of the work of art on future generations of artists. For Walter Benjamin, in a fragment written in 1920, «Kandinsky expresses this by saying that the permanent value of works of art appears more vividly to later generations, since they are less receptive toward their contemporary value» («The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages» 235).

When the problem of what makes a work of art new is being discussed, innovations are often attributed at the level of the representation, as attention is often attracted by content-related issues, but the question of the new also relates to the way the work of art is made, what formal innovations does it deploy, and why? How do formal innovations pressure the sense of what can and cannot be tolerated in the representation itself? The concept of culture is invoked whenever what is good or bad, progressive or backwards, valuable or worthless about the artwork is discussed. Censorship does not need to be actively imposed by a government for institutional validation to be required in conferring value, and this is where the discourse of culture is hardly unmotivated, depending on the parameters of this discourse, and the interests served by it.

The threshold of tolerance for the work of art, apart from violations of what are held to be commonly accepted standards of taste, may also be that limit where the possibility of understanding has passed, and accusations of incoherence, randomness and chance operations are customary, not to mention content-inspired accusations of racism, sexism and nationalism. Films have been in the making for more than a century, and there are by now at least as many tacit assumptions of how a film should be made as there once were for the novel. Peter Gidal has remarked that «the realist novel lives on today largely in

the guise of commercial narrative cinema» (qtd. in Byg 237). Since more attention is generally given to the representation than to the method of its making, such basic concepts as the frame, the shot and the cut are impossible to ignore, as most films endeavor to present an appearance of naturalness by strictly following conventions. The most conventional films draw no attention to how they are made.

The formal question, the technical question, the material question of the single take in Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, alternately characterized in the discussion of this film published in *Art Margins*, www.artmargins.com, an online journal in English dedicated to contemporary visual arts in Eastern Europe and Russia, as an eye that does not blink, an innovation that makes film history as the longest shot in the history of the medium, a director's decision which demanded of its photographer the physical ability to carry the heavy camera equipment on his back, referred to by one writer as «the self-mortification of the photographer» and as a device without a future, a «stunt,» a one-shot deal (Eshelman). Mention is also made of public disagreement expressed by the director over an award given to the photographer, a difference further sharpened by the national identities attributed to Sokurov and Tilman Buettner, one Russian and the other German.

The emphasis on this attribution is all the more surprising if it is remembered that the cinema itself arrives in modern times as the art form that transcends, or collapses, depending on the point of view, the national boundaries of culture and the reliance of these boundaries on the specificity of language. Subtitles are secondary to the image. The Yiddish Theater described in Kafka's *Diaries* at about the same time as the last Grand Ball at the Winter Palace in 1913, the culminating scene in *Russian Ark*, might be offered in contrast as one example of a nearly self-contained sphere of signs and gestures. What one of the writers for *Art Margins* calls the «diegetic time» of the film, which «traverses the entire epoch of Petrine reforms, from the early 18th century, to its end in 1913» (Kujundzic), another writer might view from the perspective of the gap separating the content and form of the narrative that stages an image of the aristocracy, the

monarchy, and the officer corps of an imperial army surrounded by great paintings. What is important to keep in mind, as obvious as it may sound, is that this setting and its staging are fantasmic, and being fantasy, hardly correspond to any reality beyond the appearance of history achieved by the representation. «How can one see history?» Dragan Kujundzic asks, following the direction of the opening line spoken by the narrator, «I open my eyes and see nothing [“Orkryvau glaza i nichego ne vizhu”].

By giving attention to the length of the shot in the film, 87 minutes, the concept of the frame materializes, beginning with the 24 frames in a second which give the motion picture the appearance of the naturally seen and ending with the absence of frame from the digital camera, the single take in *Russian Ark* recorded onto a portable hard drive and then transferred to 35mm film stock for distribution to cinema theaters. Can attention to a technical aspect of the film bring into view larger questions pertaining to the idea of toleration? A new work of art challenges our conceptions and definitions, and among them is this concept of the frame. Kujundzic even claims for the filmed image of the Hermitage «that its aesthetic or political representation in the movie may be nothing but a narrative about the framing of Russian history». A Russian audience would know very well the story of the empty frames at the Hermitage during the siege of Leningrad passed across allusively in *Russian Ark*, the ones left hanging in the halls after the paintings were removed to Sverdlovsk. This parable of absence finds an echo in Benjamin's remarks on Eugène Atget's use of emptiness and its usefulness for a later generation of surrealists: «Empty is the Porte d'Arceuil by the fortifications, empty are the triumphal steps, empty are the courtyards, empty, as it should be, is the Place du Tertre. They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant» («The Little History of Photography» 519). Several of the *Art Margins* correspondents mention the intellectual tension in *Russian Ark* as being situated in the awareness of the clearing out of the lodging that was once the Winter Palace which, in the suppression of all

reference to this evacuation monumentalized by Eisenstein's 1927 *October*, and displaced by the more explicable event of the siege of Leningrad, makes itself all the more forcefully present by its absence.

Frame and shot and cut open up the immense problem of how to represent time. What is the threshold of what it is possible to view, and is this threshold the same as the threshold of what can and cannot be seen? In Kujundzic's essay the cut is Vertov's: «Another repressed subtext of the long take engaged by the movie, is the whole modernist impact of the kino-eye by Dziga Vertov, or catching life unawares, and his application of the cut as the generative device of his filming. *The Man with the Movie Camera* consists not only of extremely short takes mounted to create an incredibly rapid sequence of events, rupturing the "regular" flow of historical time, erasing the past and history (the theater which is broken), but even includes some of the subliminal and invisible takes which go below the threshold of visibility as they are shorter than 24 frames and therefore cannot be perceived except as the visual unconscious of the movie». In Godard's *Forever Mozart*, the scene on the seashore of the multiple takes that submits the actress to the repetitions of a single shot until the director is satisfied stages the production most films don't present, which is not necessarily the work of the single long shot. The frame can also get away from us and serve as a metonym for everything that might be said to surround the object. Without the frame could we even see the object? The discursive frame, for example, proposes a perspective from which to view the otherwise silent and self-sufficient artwork, Raoul Eshelman's «narrative, spatial or critical frames which center and simultaneously constrict simple or "dense" subjects, who are induced to overcome the inhibiting frames around them».

The camera never blinks, they say about Sokurov's film. *They* are Natascha Drubek-Meyer, Raoul Eshelman and Katja Petrovskaja writing from Munich, Dragan Kujundzic writing from the University of California-Irvine, Nele Sasz writing from Berlin, and Ulrich Schmid writing from Frankfurt. Their roundtable discussion addresses the threshold of the limits of toleration: the length of the shot and its simulation of historical time. Here is a sample of their points of view:

Petrovskaja: «The one shot approach here functions as a synonym of real time and real history, as if reality as such was presented. But at the same time the absence of cuts causes “ideological cuts” and reductions».

Eshelman: «The uncut 87-minute time of the shot, is Everyman’s time. It’s the same time you would get if you would be able to film your sister’s wedding reception with a camcorder in one continuous sequence. The time of the shot is real time, essentially parallel to the viewer’s time [...] this is banal, artless time; it’s the time you want to get out of by tapping into duration.»

Petrovskaja: «The absence of cuts turns out to be the putting on of blinders, or turns into an inability to see something else [...] the technical characteristics of the film deprive the spectator of the possibility of seeing from “another point of view».

Drubek-Meyer: «The extremely long shot averts the attention from vision and stimulates us to feel other senses [...] by showing different textures, by adding the murmuring off voice. [...] Sokurov makes the digital experience a tactile one. It is as if the steadicam closely connected with Buettner’s body by a special vest and a backpack construction made it possible to record/see/feel reality with the whole body».

Kujundzic: «Far from being an attempt at “restoration” of the imperial past, it is an evidence of the disruptive power of history and irreversibility of its passing. The period and the world which the film “restores” suffers from multiple historico-political and aesthetic erasures. [...] The incessant, theoretically infinite or at the very least uncut, gaze without a blink, opens itself to a relentless rupturing and ruination of the visible and the represented».

Eshelman: «The immanent long shot has been made to pass through an even longer, transcendent span of time [...] to jump-start history again, to create a singular event in the open sea of an otherwise eventless post-historical expanse».

Petrovskaja: «The absence of montage in this film is a very dangerous symptom for the growing symbiosis of “independent intellect” and the usurpation of point of view, which is slowly but surely taking place in Russia where, actually, even oppositional TV is brought to zero».

«The distance to the past is inviolable» writes one film scholar in a study published almost ten years ago of the cinema of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (Byg 45). Three points from this study bear mentioning here. The first has to do with the technique of the single take and its attempt to represent real time. Sokurov has been quoted as having said that he had wanted to make a film in a single take for fourteen years, but he is not the first director to have this conception. A question from a 1981 interview with Rainer Werner Fassbinder asks about Straub's influence: «But weren't you inspired by him to use a slow narrative rhythm, and a principle of real time in which occurrences on the screen last exactly as long as they do in reality?» (Qtd. in Byg 90). The second point refers to the work of mourning in post-war German cinema and many film-makers' interpretations of the twentieth-century history of Nazism as collective trauma and loss of a classical cultural heritage. In Eric Santner's study, *Stranded Objects*, attention is drawn to «ambitious attempts by recent German artists to create works of national elegiac art: works that make use of the procedures and resources of mourning to constitute something like a German self-identity in the wake of the catastrophic turns of recent German history. In each case the task of mourning involves the labor of recollecting the stranded objects of a cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned by an unspeakable horror» (qtd. in Byg 44). It's interesting to note how close this description comes to Dragan Kujundzic's reading of *Russian Ark* as a work of mourning: «After the Soviet Revolution, a sense of a loss occupies the space in Russian historical identity, since the past prior to it becomes inaccessible for historical continuation, restoration, and mourning». He also writes of Sokurov's film that «the Soviet period represents an absent cause of *The Russian Ark*, its catastrophic effects on the building generate the repressed or invisible origin that makes this movie possible». Thus, the film «could mark the beginning of the assessment of the Petrine tradition as the site of melancholic desire for Russian identificatory aspirations.» This association of Nazism with Stalinism reiterates, however obliquely, the German historian Ernst Nolte's revisionist thesis that

the world wars were a class struggle civil war disguised as inter-imperialist conflicts. The third point remembers Bertolt Brecht's and Walter Benjamin's ideas about the heightened unreality of the cinema: «The legitimation of bourgeois ideology begins with the very same “unreality” in cinema that Brecht saw but uses it to strengthen, rather than reveal, the power of its novelistic representations of imaginary social relations» (Byg 237).

After the same war that the drone of planes and the starving carpenter evoke in *Russian Ark*, Brecht established the Berliner Ensemble in East Germany. *Antigone*, *Galileo* and *Mother Courage* were among the plays staged at this time, and for these productions a Model Book was conceived for the purpose of documenting the original performance in view of the problem of interpretation by future directors. These Model Books consisted largely of photography, and the photographer for them was a member of the Berliner Ensemble, an acknowledged co-author of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Ruth Berlau. Her photography confirms the comment by Louis Althusser in an review of the original production of *Mother Courage*, where he mentions the ashen black and grey stage, and the idea of a stage of ashen black and grey rising out of a world in ashes is also suggested by the *Mutter Courage Modell*, the photography for which was determined by the demands of the stage lighting, shots taken at low exposure with a Leica 35mm camera, the minimal light leaking into shutter set at the threshold where the image begins to blur. Apart from their documentary function, which as Brecht recorded in his diary was how he thought of them, Berlau's photography for the Model Books might also be viewed as representing the first interpretation of the post-war Brechtian theater, a visual re-mix reinscribed with the same muteness that afflicts Kattrin in *Mother Courage*. In the photographer's interpretation the real-time continuum of the performance is seized, halted and isolated into a series of frames, reconstructing from the performance an analytical montage in which cut and frame are foregrounded as necessary devices of the cinematic image.

The cinema is being thought about by Berlau in this late-1940s photography, and in a significant way the lessons of Sergei Eisenstein

and Dziga Vertov, perhaps filtered through the Workers Photography Movement in pre-war Germany, are being appropriated and applied by an artist so marginalized that it is difficult to claim for her any intention beyond Brecht's own. Bringing the marginal figure of a photographer like Berlau into the discussion of *Russian Ark* repeats Benjamin's reference to Atget in *The Little History of Photography*, and including both Berlau and Atget in reference to Sokurov's film provides another frame for viewing the technical work of Tilman Buettner, despite the changes in the cameras themselves. The speed of the lenses was an issue already in the 1880s, and for Benjamin, the darkness surrounding the first subjects was disappearing. Kujundzic writes of the spectrality of *Russian Ark*, though in contrast with the early years of photography the darkness of the digital cinema seems staged, a copy of a copy, or appearance of the appearance, simulacra. The darkness of the Berliner Ensemble's stage in post-war East Germany is uncanny for its allegory of history (the Thirty Years War and its overlay with World War II) and the aura of ash. «What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be» («The Little History of Photography» 518). From the analysis of the 1948 staging of *Mother Courage* accomplished by Berlau's cutting into the time of the production and developing the visual sign of duration, the recent war is distanced and made visible to the mind's eye, which is to say that the thought of the recent war, the war that was still too close to be seen, in 1948, begins to approach perception in that theater.

Does *Russian Ark* do just the opposite by trying to bring near what is irretrievably distant, deploying the single take, the long shot and its documentary frisson of unedited time, manufacturing darkness where there is none, that darkness which for Benjamin held «the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject»? («The Little History of Photography» 510). It is too easy to dismiss montage when such imposing figures as Eisenstein and Vertov, not to mention Malevich, are mentioned in the *Art Margins* roundtable as post-revolutionary

influences whose influence is being suppressed, or erased, in *Russian Ark*. For Benjamin, writing in 1931, «the Russian feature film was the first opportunity in decades to put before the camera people who had no use for their photographs. And immediately the human face appeared on film with new and immeasurable significance. But it was no longer a portrait. What was it?» («The Little History of Photography» 519-20). This is precisely the question incited by the shock of the new and its multiple exposures, or long takes, all that the physiognomy of anonymity and collectivity cannot answer with a single word or date in time, like 1913.

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