Gorod zero (City Zero) directed by Karen Shakhnazarov in 1989, and Russkii kovcheg (Russian Ark) directed by Aleksandr Sokurov in 2002 both feature museums. In a memorable scene, City Zero’s protagonist takes a tour through the town’s history museum, while the entirety of Russian Ark is a guided museum tour. These two films, when viewed together, have much to say about the way Soviet and post-Soviet historical narratives are constructed. To understand the context in which the later film Russian Ark was created, it is useful to analyze City Zero because the late Soviet-era film allows one to see how Russian Ark earnestly engages in the very process of creating a historical narrative that City Zero is mocking. Ultimately, both films illustrate that the creation of Soviet and Russian archives and historical narratives—choosing to “remember” certain parts of the past while “forgetting” others (the process that is the subject of Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever)—is indicative of insecurities about past and future, insecurities lurking underneath the surface from the time of Petrine reforms to the present. Prominent among these insecurities, displayed and possibly perpetuated by these films, is Russia’s uneasiness about its place in the world in relation to Europe and retention of its relevance in world history.

A teleological view of history governs the structuring of Soviet and Russian historical narratives. This teleological view is mocked in Shakhnazarov’s City Zero and resurfaces in Sokurov’s Russian Ark. We see the same “dual sense of time” in the 2002 film as we do in the late Soviet one. In The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual Katerina Clark discusses this dual sense of time that she labels as a mythic Great Time. The Great Time denotes a mythical period where events in the present acquire meaning only according to their connection to it. Because Soviet culture is inherently Messianic its Great Time occupies both the past and future. Dragos Kujundzic in his article “After ‘After’: The Archive Fever of Alexander Sokurov” writes about Russia’s perception of the future. For him, this Messianic view of the future is not something new to Soviet society, but rather dates back to Petrine reforms. Kujundzic writes, “After Peter’s intervention into history at the beginning of the 18th century, initiated by a self-perception of Russian backwardness (being "after" all other nations), Russia inherited the sense of an immense acceleration and Messianic futurity.” He further argues that Russia’s feeling of “lateness” combined with its sense of rapid acceleration into a Utopian future allows it to exist simultaneously “before” and “after history.” This sense of existing “before” and “after” history carried over into Soviet culture. In fact, Kujundzic even deems the Soviet era as the Petrine era’s “teleological fulfillment” since its teleological view of history would never have been possible without the Petrine era’s desire to eradicate backwardness. To prevent eternal lateness, Russia adopted many Western cultural models, which, according to Kujundzic “constructed and deconstructed” Russia’s national identity. The Soviet Union, like Russia in the Petrine era, operated with the goal of someday not only catching up to the West, but eventually coming before it in importance and influence on the world stage. Having a teleological view of history with its expectations of grandeur in the future allows one to cope with anxieties about being “behind” in the present. Anxieties about Russia’s identity in relation to the West are extremely evident in the historical narratives produced in both films. Both strive very hard to weave together narratives that strongly feature the Soviet Union’s or Russia’s relevance to world history.

In City Zero Aleksei Varakin, an engineer from Moscow, is sent to a small town on a business trip to procure an air-conditioner part for his company. Strangeness ensues almost immediately after his arrival. The strangeness and eeriness of this town makes Varakin uncomfortable, and when he tries to leave, he realizes that there is no way out. He arrives at the town’s history museum shortly after an unsuccessful attempt to locate a train station. The history museum in City Zero shows a conscious effort to place and associate what is presently
Soviet territory with major Western historical events and figures. The museum uses the aesthetics of the absurd to lay bare the construction of the Soviet historical narrative and mock it. On entering the basement floor where the museum is located, a sign reads “Our Power is in the truth of history” (В Правде истории сточник нашей силы). The museum director very matter-of-factly guides Varakin around the museum and tells the history of the town in one narrative stream, practically without pause, except to say Подёмите дальше (“Let’s go further”).

The viewer is taken through a series of historical artifacts, dioramas and wax figures of historical personages, who, besides sharing the same basement, seem to have no logical connection with one another. But the director insists that they do. Perhaps this tour in some way parodies Soviet historiography. For example, according to Roger D. Markwick in Rewriting History in Soviet Russia, Stalin’s “Short Course” History of the Communist Party can be characterized, in part, by its omissions. Markwick writes: “...the short course was more than a falsification of facts; it was a ‘method of omission’...A very limited and specific selection of facts and events, placed in a standard scheme, in conformity with Party directives...”

What is included in this tour and what is not, often relates to the Soviet/Russian view of itself in relation to the West. There are several moments in the tour where it is evident that the Soviet town is attempting to forge for itself a place in European history. For example, the director insists that Trojans and Romans occupied present-day Soviet territory. When Varakin questions the veracity of the director’s narrative, he is refuted on the basis of “scientific” evidence, unconvincingly explained, but completely accepted by the museum director. According to Markwick, the Soviet Union wanted to put itself in the forefront of historical scholarship, by using more “scientific” methods. He writes, “The Soviets, spurning the accepted division in the West between the national and social sciences or humanities, attempted to replicate the tightly organized, ‘mature’ natural sciences.”

The town’s history museum not only mocks Soviet historiography but also reveals much about it at the same time. First, we see how much value is put into the past and how certain events are mythologized. For some strange reason, there is much emphasis on the first time that rock and roll was publicly played in the city. It is clear that this event has taken on mythical proportions, as the town even commemorates this event an additional time in the film and Varakin is coerced into participating. The film also strips bare for the viewer the process of historical narrative construction; how events deemed to have significance for some reason or other are featured in this history while others are not. In this particular case, the history appears to be absurd as there are no real links to connect these events and historical personalities. The pure absurdity and grotesqueness of the historical dioramas highlight the very fabricated nature of the historical narrative. What the narrative does and does not include reveals the insecurities that guided the selection process for its construction. This process, the gathering together of signs, is what Derrida calls cosignation.

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Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*, like other Russian films released during the turn of the 21st century, including Mikhailov’s *Barber of Siberia* and Panfilov’s *The Romanovs*, idealize Imperial Russia. Anna Lawton comments that the latter two films “aim at recovering the spiritual values that were lost and, therefore, tend to idealize the old regime, leaving off-screen the great failures of the tsarist administration, and of Nicholas himself, which led to the Bolshevik revolution.” *Russian Ark* is also in dialog with the West, something else that it shares with its fellow films. In *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in post-Soviet Film* Yana Hashamova contends that *Russian Ark* has a more reflective and mature view of the West. However, it seems that Sokurov’s film is less of a reflective, mature view of the West’s influence on Russian history and culture, and more of a Russian nationalist idealization of the Russian autocratic past, especially, since it deliberately steers away from some seven decades of Soviet (and Russian) history.

There are moments from the Soviet period in the film, to be sure, but these moments are incredibly fleeting. Moreover, these brief glimpses into the Soviet era (in the Throne room and the storage room) focus chiefly on the Imperial legacy, in that they express anxieties about its preservation. In *Ark*, the Soviet Union has a limited presence, and when it is present it is shone only as a conflict for the Petrine legacy to confront. *Russian Ark*—like the museum scene in *City Zero* features a dialogue in which the objections and challenges to authority by the museum visitor are ignored. However, in *Russian Ark*, the visitor Cuistine is made to look foolish and is used as a kind of straw man. His ignorant remarks are answered with the repetition of his words by the narrator or given a condescending silent treatment. By the end of the film, Custine is forced to realize that his perceptions of Russia are incorrect when he is proven wrong several times by the narrator, for example, when he admires music that is playing and incorrectly assumes that it cannot be a Russian composer.

As with *City Zero*, whose museum deals with historical artifacts that are supposed to be exclusive to the West, the Hermitage in *Russian Ark* also features objects from the West. In fact, there are no Russian objects in the Hermitage. The film seems to show Russia’s ability to not only acquire pieces of Western culture, but appreciate them in way that the West cannot. For example, the film features a scene where a boy is gazing at a painting of Peter and Paul. He has not read the scriptures, but can still appreciate and understand the painting on a deeper level. Hashamova assesses this particular scene:

> Their [the museum goers'] perception different from Custine’s appreciation of the picture filtered through his knowledge of the biblical story, is no less valuable than his. On the contrary, the reaction of the Russian young visitor reveals the unusual role of Russian culture vis-à-vis western culture: to reassess it and revitalize it.

There are also other instances in the film where Russian visitors seem to be enjoying the paintings and sculptures, almost as if they can “feel” some deep meaning that cannot be deciphered by book knowledge alone. Perhaps Russia’s ability to learn not only to appreciate Western Art but revitalize it, relates to Kujundzic’s idea about Russia being both “before” and “after” history, because Russia’s “lateness” makes it youthful, giving it a fresher perspective than an “aging” Europe, as represented in the film by Custine.

In final assessment of *Ark*, it is clear from the very careful selection of historical figures and scenes and maneuvering of the Soviet period that the film does not wish to see Soviet culture as Russian culture. Combining this careful selection of fragments with a one-shot technique makes for a narrative that is seamless whereas *Gorod Zero*’s narrative is anything but. Perhaps this one-shot technique, which entails skillfully arranging everything beforehand, is related to the process of *consignation* in archiving, selecting bits and pieces to create a desired,
more homogenous narrative. Kujundzic discusses how, Sokurov's digitally filmed *Russian Ark* imitates history:

> It reproduces history, but as a unique event, an archivization that wavers between a “live gaze at history and a musefied iterability, its return as a “dead,” self-enclosed and spectralized spectacle...The one-take film (which is only technologically possible with video) fashions itself after history in that there can be no montage, no cut and paste, no changes, additions, subtractions, do overs.  

Sokurov's “cinema in one breath” makes his manipulation of history less obvious, since cutting, editing and arranging post filming would have made consignation in the construction process of the film’s historical narrative much more visible. This shameless omission of an entire historical period proves that Sokurov really does perceive the Soviet period as he names it at the beginning of the film--an accident. Such a view also denies the Petrine era’s connection and responsibility for the radicalness of the Revolution. Seeing the Revolution and an entire era as an accident implies that it was never supposed to happen, a glitch in an otherwise perfect story that originated with the Petrine reforms. This story is supposed to end with Russia realizing its potential, revitalizing Western culture and ideas, and occupying a meaningful place with Europe on the world stage.

Despite the similar methods used to construct historical narratives in both films, there is one important difference. Interestingly enough, like *Russian Ark, City Zero* shows the mythical Great Time of the past, but, unlike *Russian Ark*, nothing about the future. A boat floating in water is the last image that the viewer sees in both films; however, in each film the boat means something different. Varakin is floating aimlessly in a boat at the end of *City Zero* after he “escapes” the town. Though he has escaped, it is clear that he is not going anywhere, as he has no oars. It seems as if Varakin is resting and glad (maybe even relieved) to be in the present moment. He has ceased to think of the present in connection with some Great Time in the future (or past). *Russian Ark*’s ark, on the other hand, opens out to eternity “We are destined to sail forever and live forever,” the narrator tells us. Perhaps the absence of a future in *Gorod Zero*’s museum scene and uneventful ending tells us that the late Soviet period of perestroika (when *Gorod Zero* was made) was but a brief break from dual temporality--Messianic perceptions of the future and a mythical view of the past. Perhaps there is a greater difference between perestroika and the two eras labeled Soviet and post-Soviet. Perhaps the collapse of a regime can create sweeping changes in some spheres (like in politics) but not in others. Perhaps perestroika is different because it punctuates two periods that in some ways, especially with regard to construction of historical narrative.

ENDNOTES

6. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 75.

REFERENCES


