

# Alexander Sokurov's *Francofonia*: The Louvre during the Nazi occupation

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*Written and directed by Alexander Sokurov*

*Francofonia* is the latest film by Russian director Alexander Sokurov (born 1951), responsible for *Mother and Son* (1997), *Moloch* (1999), *Taurus* (2001), *Russian Ark* (2002), *Father and Son* (2003), *The Sun* (2004) and numerous other films.

The new work opens in Sokurov's apartment as he attempts to make a videophone connection with a friend, the captain of a ship carrying precious artwork through stormy seas. The connection is breaking up, the vessel's fate is uncertain. "It is inhumane to carry art across the sea," deplores the film director, creating a metaphoric link between turbulent waters and human history and comparing the ship full of art to the Biblical ark.

Sokurov's narration drifts along as he discusses the centuries of human culture contained within the walls of the Louvre Museum in Paris, the world's largest such institution, and ponders the essence of art and its significance for humanity. In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov took the viewer on a tour of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, while *Francofonia* revolves around the fate of the Louvre during the Nazi occupation.

In the film's fictional portions, the director of the Louvre in World War II, Jacques Jaujard (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing), and Count Franziskus Wolff-Metternich (Benjamin Utzerath), appointed by the Nazis to oversee France's art collection, enter into an unspoken alliance to protect the museum's invaluable art. When a victorious Hitler enters Paris in 1940, he finds the Louvre empty, with most of the art objects having been evacuated to various *châteaux* (manor houses) in the Loire Valley in central France.

Narrated in the form of fragments from a poetic diary, the film recreates the events of the time by combining vintage photographs and documentary material with sepia-toned footage shot by Sokurov. The effective soundtrack is a mixture of the music of Gustav Mahler, human whispers and street noise.

*Francofonia* is probably one of the few films Sokurov has

made worth taking seriously, primarily due to the importance of the issues it raises—the looting of art by the Hitler regime and the defence of culture. Sokurov links the period of the Nazi occupation to the contemporary danger of war and Europe's refugee crisis. However, merely raising critical issues does not guarantee their successful treatment.

The new film demonstrates better taste than many of the director's previous morbid, murky projects, which revealed serious historical and social wrongheadedness, but *Francofonia* too is damaged by Sokurov's impressionistic viewpoint. A genuine appreciation for art, culture and education is combined here, as one often finds in Sokurov, with peculiar and disoriented thoughts and obsessions, as well as sweeping and unfounded statements. For example, the ghost of Napoleon (Vincent Nemeth) roams the galleries of the Louvre in *Francofonia*, claiming that he went to war for art.

Sokurov has been capable throughout his filmmaking career of certain striking and intense images, but his—at best—terribly confused ideas continually weaken his art. Like many Soviet-born artists and intellectuals, he no doubt identifies—or chooses to identify—Marxism with Stalinism. In opposition to the official Soviet doctrines and postmodern relativism, he has adopted an eclectic ideology with elements of anti-communism, quasi-mysticism and artistic austerity. Determined not to make films that might be interpreted in any precise "scientific" or "historical" sense, Sokurov's works suffer from vagueness and deliberate unsightliness and the essential pessimism of his outlook.

Sokurov told a Berlin press conference in 2009 in regard to his films about Hitler, Lenin and Hirohito, "I am not interested in the history or politics which took place, I am not really interested in historical events or the period, I am much more interested in the human being," as though there was such a thing as an abstract-biological "human being" apart from "history or politics."

For Sokurov, art is elegy. His obsession with death and the "beyond" is repeatedly manifested through an interest in the transcendental and in fortune-telling, a fixation with eyes,

feet (sometimes crucified) and hands, as well as his search for the “eternal” in the midst of the changeable. In *Francofonia*, the filmmaker searches for answers to philosophical questions among the dead, focusing on the expression in the eyes of Tolstoy and Chekhov in old photographs, trying to raise them from the grave or at least summon their spirits. He mourns them as father figures who died at the most important juncture in history, leaving childish humanity to fend for itself.

Sokurov’s world is distorted, full of phantoms, awaiting apocalypse. Barbarism and ugliness are the norm in a society where “Liberty, equality, brotherhood” is only a slogan. It is enough to recall his reduction of Romanticism to pornographic revulsion in *Faust*, the mummy-like grotesqueness of Lenin (*Taurus*) and the physical monstrosity of Solzhenitsyn (*Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn*).

The narrow focus on objects, combined with a muffled audio and the degraded quality of the tinted frame, in the end creates an unpleasant, claustrophobic sense of being trapped in a cage, drowning and suffocating. Beauty in his films fades, cracks with age or under brutal blows.

As part of the mishmash of his influences, Sokurov follows French philosopher Michel Foucault (*Of Other Spaces*) and treats museums as heterotopias no different than prisons or temples. Beauty, according to this reasoning, is always captured. Looted or acquired art is a war trophy.

“Whoever is in possession of these artifacts usurps the historical memory and fate of a people,” said Sokurov, sounding like a Nietzschean. “Paintings may give us an understanding of who we are as Europeans,” he adds. Known for turning his movies into historical burlesque, he sees the portrait as a driving force in European development (in opposition to the Muslim world), with rulers like Napoleon promoting art not only through plunder, but by commissioning the artists to glorify them. Art, and especially older art, according to him, portrays the fear of power. “Power is ubiquitous; it governs everywhere. If you believe in God’s plan then power is part of that plan—the best part as far as I can see,” he observes.

Sokurov also warns against the “non-European barbarians,” who are risking their lives to reach Europe, because they will destroy the continent’s culture. “We love and appreciate Europe, European individuality. Do not assimilate, look after yourselves,” Sokurov said at a press conference at the 2015 Venice Film Festival where *Francofonia* premiered. “What the Nazis would not dare, was quickly and ruthlessly realised by Islamic terrorists,” he added referring to the destruction of Palmyra in Syria by ISIS.

Pointing to the threat of a Franco-German alliance, Sokurov singles out the Nazis’ respect for French culture as

opposed to their destructive treatment of the Hermitage during the siege of Leningrad, when eastern Europe art was stolen or destroyed. However, it is not Sokurov’s admiration for the first workers state or support for the heroism of its defence that prompts his comment: he is rather making an appeal for the resurrection of Russia’s supposed past military and patriotic glory and the mobilisation of its population in the face of the dangers facing their country.

The film ends with the blurry red screen turning black and blue and a cacophony of the distorted sounds of the Soviet and Russian anthems.

*Francofonia* is not devoid of beauty, and there are scenes that are moving, like the one in which Sokurov touches the marble statue of Eros in an effort to connect with the past. There is also an amazing surrealist scene in which a German warplane flies through the Louvre. Sokurov’s movies tend to be dream-like, but it is ironic that he refers to surrealist art. The surrealists, many of whom were strongly connected to the socialist movement, were uncompromising opponents of capitalism, religion and nationalism.

Stalinism and the wreckage of the Soviet Union have helped produce Sokurov’s filmmaking. The result is an artistic stagnation, like a half-dead body in the swamp, unable to envision a better world, incapable of inspiring anyone or indicating a way forward for humanity. Political and social emancipation is unthinkable for him. The filmmaker is not to blame for the historical tragedies that befell him, along with wide layers of the Soviet population, but he has not made any serious, rational effort to understand them. The results are accordingly meagre.

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