

EDITOR'S NOTES

Hubert Robert. A Fortunate Life

The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg has been, for the inhabitants of the city, much more than just a museum. Outside the walls of this architectural ensemble of several 18th – 19th century buildings standing along the Neva river in the very centre of the city, lay the signs of the cultural devastation left by the Soviet regime. Outside the dissidents were sent off to the Gulags, while the inhabitants of the communal housing estates lived in great poverty. Inside the Hermitage, all those things were also present (including communal flats for the museum staff in one of the palaces). But this large museum compound, thanks to its complexity and to its traditions, also remained an exceptional shelter for Culture and for the Humanities, as well as for the people who studied them. One could visit the museum again and again during all of one's life, and still be unable to fathom all the riches of this 'Vatican of the North', with its kilometres of mysterious corridors and its magnificent rooms, its vast cellars and secret courtyards. In recent years the museum has begun to develop its commercial activities, and is gradually losing its old aura. But back in 1996, at the time of the production of *Hubert Robert. A Fortunate Life*, modernisation was yet far away.



A STILL FROM *HUBERT ROBERT. A FORTUNATE LIFE*

A filmmaker like Alexander Sokurov, with his profound interest in painting and classical culture, could not help becoming attached to such an island, or Ark, as he prefers to refer to it – as though it were island sailing through time.

Andrei Deryabin, born in a big Russian city in the Urals, graduated from Leningrad University with a degree in Russian Literature, and worked in the University Library before switching to cinema production. In the 1990's, he founded the Hermitage Bridge Studio, a company which had close links with the Hermitage Museum, and an office at Lenfilm Studios. Deeply moved by Alexander Sokurov's filmmaking, Andrei Deryabin helped the filmmaker many times on different occasions. He also participated in the production of *Confession* and of *Moloch*, before co-producing, together with Egoli Tossell Films, the famous *Russian Ark*. But all these films were made later.

In 1996, Andrei Deryabin and the commercial director of the Hermitage Museum, Vladimir Matveev, created a film series under the name of the *World of the Hermitage*. The first filmmaker available to work on a film from this series, sufficiently well-known to be accepted by the Museum, was Alexander Sokurov. The Museum's director Mikhail Piotrowski was much surprised by Sokurov's choice of painter: "Oh, Robert... of course, with him there will be no problem..."

Hubert Robert, the French painter of ancient ruins, is known to every high school student in St. Petersburg with a more or less advanced interest in culture. His numerous canvases are easily found in many palaces on the outskirts of the city as well as in the Hermitage itself. They were often commissioned by Russian tsars and noblemen, who con-

sidered themselves closer to Western Europe rather than to their own country, which they found too godforsaken and Asian. But despite his established reputation, he is still considered more of an interior decorator than of a first-rate master.

It was in this context that the sad story of this artist's fortunate life and over successful career was produced...

The film was shot on 35mm negative, then transferred to video for the post-production. There was the hope that one day a 35mm film version could be made to be shown in cinemas, but there wasn't a big enough production budget. Of course, the high quality 35mm picture of *Robert* on the screen would be very impressive, and this hope still lingers. Both existing versions of *Robert*, the full one, presented on this DVD, and the 12 min "festival" version are on video.

The picture of both of the films on this disk is hand-crafted, it didn't exist in reality before the filmmaker crafted it. Perhaps there is more craft in them than in all other existing Alexander Sokurov documentaries. In *Robert*, the special effects were created for the most part during the shooting, like in a classical film production. *Elegy of a Voyage*, on the contrary, was entirely crafted on the editing computer, with very complicated special effects, often at the very limits of technical feasibility for standard video definition. This was the first film entirely done by the young video editor Serguei Ivanoff who joined the crew in 1999 as trainee video editor.

Let us return now to *Robert*. It was shot during the winter of 1995-96, shortly before *Mother and Son*, (shot during the summer of 1996), and even if Alexander Sokurov himself denies *Robert* being a kind of trial run for *Mother and Son*, it is difficult not to see the affinities between the two films. *Robert* was, by the way, the first serious work on 35 mm of the cameraman Alexei Fiodorov, who had worked before as a Betacam video operator on *Spiritual Voices* and *Oriental Elegy* before helming the 35mm camera on *Mother and Son* and *Moloch*.

Hubert Robert. A Fortunate Life was screened for the Hermitage staff and guests in the small Hermitage Theatre (one can see this theatre in the *Russian Ark*, in the scene where Catherine II is watching a performance). After the film, the screen was raised to unveil the Hermitage Symphonic Orchestra. It played the opening musical theme of the film. Then a small concert ensued.

The reaction of the Hermitage employees to the film was mixed. As far as we know, the other films of the *World of the Hermitage* series have never been produced, principally due to lack of budget, but also perhaps due to a lack of worthy artistic projects.

Elegy of a voyage

Mother and Son brought big changes into the lives of Alexander Sokurov's crew. The success of the film and a following retrospective of Sokurov's films at the Festival d'Automne in Paris, organised by the French movie magazine, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, marked the first major international acclaim of Sokurov's filmmaking. After the festival, the French producer Pierre-Olivier Bardet asked to meet Alexander Sokurov, and in December 1998 he went to St. Petersburg to present the filmmaker with a project that, at first impression, had much in common with *Robert*.

It was going to be a 20 minute documentary, shot in Super 16 in the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, which was to be put, for one night, at the filmmaker's entire disposal. The film was to be part of the *Nightwatch* project, a series of five films directed by renowned

filmmakers, among them Johan van der Keuken and Alexander Sokurov. The five films were then to be put together and shown as one.

Let us now go back a few years. In our DVD series *Documentaries by Alexander Sokurov*, a DVD named *Elegy of the Land* includes the film *Maria*. The second part of this 40-min documentary begins with a very long moving shot, taken from a car following a Russian road, on a drizzling grey late autumn day. Accompanied by music by the contemporary Russian composer Alfred Schnittke, this 7-minute scene with neither commentary, nor dialogues, leaves a staggering impression.



VALDAY IN JANUARY 2001

"If you've managed to master something that professional, the next time you will be able to make use of it as an artist. The moving shot in *Maria* gave birth to the whole idea of *Elegy of a Voyage*", Alexander Sokurov said.

We had never had the luck of seeing producer showing up and saying: "Mr Sokurov, I want to give you money to do whatever you like". This was the first time it happened. Pierre-Olivier finished speaking, Alexander took one or two minutes to think it over, and then improvised what we know today as *Elegy of a Voyage*, without the final details, but very close to what was to be the actual film.



A STILL FROM *ELEGY OF A VOYAGE*, VALDAY

In April 1999 we went to Rotterdam, where we met the then director of the Boijmans Museum, Chris Dercon, the initiator of the *Nightwatch* project, a very remarkable person. When night fell we entered the Boijmans Museum, with Pierre-Olivier Bardet, Chris Dercon and the cameraman Alexei Fiodorov. We went to the room where the final painting in the film, *St. Mary's Square and Church in Utrecht*, by Pieter Saenredam, was on exhibition. The canvas had been chosen by Alexander Sokurov in the catalogue beforehand. Someone, I believe it was Chris Dercon, switched off the light. In the darkness, with only a little shining through from the sodium lamps

in the park, Alexander recounted to us the story of his film, and we were all immersed in its magic atmosphere... Pierre-Olivier regretted a lot not having filmed – it could have been our film, he said, the night at the Boijmans by Alexander Sokurov.

After this magical start, things came to a standstill. Johan van der Keuken died. The initial financing scheme went to pieces. "The French have forgotten us", Alexander would say. He made *Moloch*, then *Dolce*, a documentary from "The Japanese Cycle". Alexei Fiodorov left the crew. At the same time, Pierre-Olivier Bardet remained in contact with us, because his company Idéale Audience was taking on the distribution of all of Alexander Sokurov's documentaires. In early autumn 2000, I met Pierre-Olivier in Moscow to tell him that, finally, Alexander was waiting only for his decision to start working on the *Nightwatch*. He answered: "If Alexander is ready, then let's do it". On my return to St. Petersburg, I told Alexander that "the French" had the financing ready (which was far from being true), and we had to start working. He said: "Well, since we have promised, we must do it". The preparations begun in October 2000, and in the end of January 2001 the small crew of Bereg Productions started the voyage from Valdai, a small town be-

tween Moscow and St.Petersburg, exactly where the famous moving shot from *Maria* was made some 15 years before. It was around Valday, with temperatures below -20°C, that were shot the monastery, the forest and the Russian villages.

The crew arrived at the border crossing in Vaalimaa, Finland, on February 1st, 2001, and filmed all the frontier checks on both sides. The following day we had a few hours in the morning to shoot in Helsinki, also with weather of -20°C. The pictures of the frosty fog in Helsinki were used afterwards for the final shot of the *Russian Ark*. Then we embarked on a ferry bound for Lübeck.



ALEXANDER SOKUROV WITH MARK LAMMERTS VAN BUEREN,
MAKING OF *ELEGY OF A VOYAGE*

In the Lübeck harbour, one of the future characters of the film awaited us. Mark Lammerts van Bueren was a production assistant and the driver of our camera car, a camping car we used to film the European part of the journey. It was while driving with Mark to Rotterdam that Alexander got the idea to film him, as in the very first outline of the project, the possibility of several encounters on the way was mentioned. Mark's monologue was pure improvisation. During the whole production, we communicated in French or English, but for the shooting of the monologue, Alexander wanted Mark to speak his native language, which was Dutch. Only much later, when Mark sent us an English translation, did we learn what he was actually saying to Alexander in his monologue...

In Rotterdam, we met with the rest of the crew of our Dutch co-producer, The Kasander Film Company. Kees Kasander, the producer Jet Christiansee and their team secured the Dutch financing, managed all the preparations and shooting in the museum, and provided drivers and vehicles for the European part of the trip.

No script was ever written for this film. Even if Alexander did have his notes, he never showed them to the crew – and to be sure, we never needed to see them. I had written a text in French for the project presentation in February 1999, before our visit to the Boijmans Museum. The text was based on Alexander's first ideas and on conversations with him over the phone:



ALEXANDER SOKUROV IN THE CAMERA CAR WITH THE CAMERA ASSISTANT
DIMITRI SHEVELEV, MAKING OF *ELEGY OF A VOYAGE*

...After the suburbs and factories of Hamburg, ancient towns will sometimes appear on my way, dreamlike, in the foggy air, as if coming from another time, another world: Bremen, Utrecht... From now on, the only chance to meet a human being is in a road café. The highway becomes a huge machine to move the flat land..

I am in Rotterdam.

The museum is lost in darkness. No one comes to meet me. I am looking for the aim of my long journey, the painting I came to see from so far...

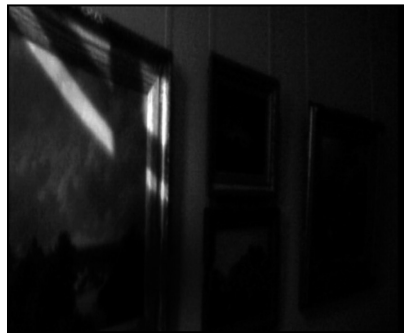
And then, here is this town, and I am on its main square, full of an ineffable and peaceful joy. There are passers-by speaking to each other, so small before the stone church with a bright wall so big and so quiet that it gives reason and relief to everything.

The voices of playing children come from across the square, so remote, and these luminous voices speak without words with the singing of birds and the slight breeze.

But no, the film does not end like that. It's Alexander, the mysterious traveller, who tries to protect with his gentle hand this tall belfry, this quiet square, this ancient town, this museum, this ark, this old world full of warmth... but the canvas and the town and the hand of the man all sink into darkness. Fugit irreparabile tempus.

Alexei Jankowski
Sebastopol, September 2006

A STILL FROM *ELEGY OF A VOYAGE*, THE BOIJMANS MUSEUM, ROTTERDAM



ELEGY OF A VOYAGE

Credits and paintings

a film by
Alexander Sokurov

Camera
Alexander Degtiarev

Sound
Serguei Moshkov

**Assistant Director
and Production Coordinator**
Alexei Jankowski

Editing and Visual Effects
Sergei Ivanoff

Camera Crew
Dmitri Sheveliov, Dirk Nijland, Abraham Haile Biru, Patrick Dekker, Evgueni Salov

Drivers
Sergei Remizov, Faissel Raijjab

Production Assistants
Mark Lammerts van Bueren, Angela van de Weerdhof, Gaëlle Guyader, Tassilo Aschauer, Margarita Afonina

Production Managers
Vladimir Persov, Jet Christiaanse, Sophie Germain

Script Editor
Alexandra Tuchinskaya

Paintings from Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam:

Pieter Jansz Saenredam
St. Mary's Square and St. Mary's Church in Utrecht

Hercules Pieterszoon Seghers
River Valley with Houses

Hendrikus van de Sande Bakhuyzen
Landscape with Cows

Andreas Schelfhout
Riverlandscape

Vincent Van Gogh
An Alley

Adam Willaerts
Estuary of the River Maas near Brielle

Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Tower of Babel

Charles Henri Joseph Leickert
City View in Winter

This film was made possible by

Chris Dercon
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam
and all the Museum staff, particularly Pedro Angela, Hugo Bongers, Wout Braber,
Ramon Essed, Frans de Jong, Friso Lammertse, Roland Niemeijer, Gerard Richters, Jan
Siteur, Florry Van Schendel, Milka Zivlak

Special thanks
Svetlana Voloshina

Alexander Mashevski, Melita Ladinskaya, Pavel Koshelev

Thanks
Lübecker Hafen-Gesellschaft mbH, Rolf Klein ; **Simon Field** ; Andrei Toloknov
The Port of Helsinki, Kari Noroviita ; **Frontier Guard Headquarters of Finland**, Major
General Matti Sandquist, **Vaalimaa Crossing Point Staff** and particularly Timo Mäkelä ;
Federal Frontier Service of Russia, Major General Konstantin Totsky ; **Frontier and
customs officers**,
Torfyanovka Crossing Point staff, Anatoly Maksimovich, Vyatcheslav Ryzhov ; **Neva
Travel Agency, St.Petersburg**, Maxim Pirogov ; **The St.Mary Monastery in Valdai**,
Archimandrite Efrem, Hieromonachos Boris, Brother Panteleimon ; **Studio AES**, Eduard
Artzihowski, Victoria Sergeeva ; **Lenfilm Studios**, Serguei Pasikan

Musical excerpts from
Frederic Chopin, Mikhail Glinka, Gustav Mahler, Piotr Tchaikovski, Serguei Slonimski

in an electronic arrangement by
Sergei Moshkov

a film produced by

Pierre-Olivier Bardet
Idéale Audience

Vladimir Persov
Bereg

Kees Kasander
The Kasander Film Company

in association with
ARTE France, Documentary Department - Thierry Garrel ; Commissioning Editor Luciano
Rigolini

with the participation of
Centre National de la Cinématographie
Rotterdam Film Fund

© Idéale Audience / Bereg / The Kasander Film Company - 2001

ALEXANDER SOKUROV

biography

Alexander Nikolayevich Sokurov was born in 1951 in the village of Podorvikha (Irkutsk Oblast, Siberia). His father, Nikolai Alexandrovich Sokurov (died in august 2003), a veteran of World War II, and his mother, Maria Andrianovna, an old age pensioner, lived in the Stavropol Territory in Southern Russia.

Having finished school, Alexander Sokurov entered the University of Gorky (now Nizhni Novgorod, an industrial town in Central Russia) in 1968. At the same time he began to work in the editorial office of the local television channel as production assistant. There he studied film-making technology, and at the age of 19 began to make his first TV programmes as a producer. He worked there for six years and produced several programmes and many direct TV air shows.

The support of Yuri Besspalov, the leading TV producer in the town of Gorky, had greatest importance for the career of Alexander Sokurov. In 1974 he graduated from the University with a diploma as a historian. In 1975 he entered the Filmmakers Department of the VGIK Cinema School in Moscow, where he was admitted to the workshop of A.M.Zguridi. Studying there, he received the Eisenstein Scholarship. The years in VGIK were marked for Sokurov by the moral and professional support from Andrei Tarkovski, who greatly valued the young filmmaker's talent. Their relations were not broken even after Tarkovski moved to the West.

In 1979 Sokurov graduated a year before his term as the result of a serious conflict with the VGIK administration and the directors of the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino). The young filmmaker's works were not accepted, he was charged with "formalism" and "anti-Soviet attitudes". In 1980, thanks to Andrei Tarkovski's recommendation, Alexander Sokurov joined the staff of the Lenfilm Studios.

The first film made by Sokurov in Leningrad received a negative reaction from Goskino and the Leningrad Communist Party leaders. For a long time, right up to Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, all of his films were banned from public screening by the censors.

Alexander Sokurov has now written and directed more than 40 films, feature as well as documentary. His films have been selected and won many awards at a great number of international festivals and retrospectives of his films are held every year in different countries all over the world.

Sokurov has won many international prizes; such as four FIPRESSI prizes, two Tarkovski prizes, Russian State Prize, Vatican Third Millennium Prize. In 1995 the European Film Academy declared Alexander Sokurov one of the best film directors of the world.

Alexander Sokurov is a member of the Russian Union of Cinematographers, and the chairman of Lenfilm Studios Art Council.

Alexandra Tuchinskaya

English translation by Anna Shoulgat, © 2001.

FILMOGRAPHY

Please click on the film title to access a synopsis on Alexander Sokurov's official website.

Feature Films

The Lonely Voice of Man

1978–1987, 87 min, colour
Lenfilm

The Degraded

1980, 30 min, colour
Mosfilm, with the participation of Lenfilm

Painful Indifference (Anaesthesia Psychica Dolorosa)

1983–1987, 110 min, colour
Lenfilm

Empire

1986, 35 min, colour
Lenfilm

Days of Eclipse

1988, 137 min, colour
Lenfilm

Save and Protect

1989, 168 min, colour
Videofilm Corp.,
Interpromex Ind. GmbH

The Second Circle

1990, 92 min, colour
Center for Creative Initiatives LO SFK,
Cinema Club Mirror (Syktyvkar), Film studio
Troitsky Most (Lenfilm)

Stone

1992, 84 min, b/w
International Studio of Perm

Whispering Pages

based on the works of Russian writers of the XIX century
1993, 77 min, colour
North Foundation, ESKOMFILM, zero film

Mother and Son

1996, 67 min, colour, Dolby stereo
North Foundation, zero film, GOSKINO

Moloch

1999, 102 min, colour, Dolby stereo
video: 2 parts (63 min each), Betacam SP, stereo
Lenfilm, zero film, Fusion Product

Taurus

film: 94 min, colour, Dolby digital
video: 2 parts (52 min each), Betacam SP, Dolby Surround
Lenfilm, Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation
State Committee of Cinematography of Russia

Russian Ark

film: 2002, 99 min, 35 mm, colour, Dolby Digital
The State Hermitage Museum, Hermitage Bridge Studio, Egoli Tossell Film AG production,
Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, Fora-Film M, Celluloid Dreams

Father and Son

2003, 94 min, 35 mm, colour, Dolby Digital
zero film, Nikola-film,
Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation

Soleil

2004, 110 min, 35 mm, colour, Dolby Digital
Nikola-film (Russia), Proline Film (Russia), Downtown Pictures (Italy)
Mact Productions (France), Riforma Film (Switzerland)

Documentaries**Maria (Peasant Elegy)**

1978–1988, 41 min, colour
LSDF

Sonata for Hitler

1979–1989, 11 min, colour
LSDF

Sonata for Viola. Dmitri Shostakovitch

1981, 80 min, b/w
LSDF

And Nothing More

1982–1987, 70 min, colour
LSDF icw Film Makers' Union

Evening Sacrifice

1984–1987, 20 min, colour
LSDF

Patience Labour

1985–1987, 10 min, colour
LSDF

Elegy

1986, 30 min, b/w
LSDF

Moscow Elegy

1986–1988, 88 min, b/w
LSDF, Film Makers' Union

Petersburg Elegy

1990, 38 min, colour

LSDF, Centre of Creative Initiative LO SFK

Soviet Elegy

1990, 37 min, colour

LSDF

To The Events In Transcaucasia

NEWSREEL No. 5, Special Issue

1990, 10 min, b/w

LSDF

A Simple Elegy

1990, 20 min, b/w

LSDF, Centre for Creative Initiatives LO SFK

A Retrospection of Leningrad (1957–1990)

in 16 parts

1990, 13 hours 08 min, b/w

LSDF

An Example of Intonation

1991, 48 min, b/w

Children and Young Filmstudio (Perm),

Centre for Creative Initiatives LO SFK

Elegy from Russia

1992, 68 min, colour

Cinema committee of the Russian Government,

Lenfilm, LSDF

Soldier's Dream

1995, 12 min, colour, BETACAM SP

North Foundation

Spiritual Voices

in 5 parts (38 min, 33 min, 87 min, 79 min, 90 min)

1995, 327 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo

ESKOMFILM, Lenfilm, Roskomkino, North Foundation, Pandora Co., Ltd (Japan)

Oriental Elegy

1996, 45 min, colour, BETACAM SP, PAL, Stereo

North Foundation, NHK, Lenfilm, SONY Corporation

Hubert Robert. A Fortunate Life

1996, full version – 26 min (short – 12 min), colour, BETACAM SP

Hermitage Bridge Studio

A Humble Life

1997, 75 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo

The Japan Foundation, North Foundation,

Pandora Co., Ltd (Japan)

The St. Petersburg Diary.
Inauguration of a monument to Dostoevsky
1997, 45 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Studio Nadezhda

The St. Petersburg Diary.
Kosintsev's Flat
1998, 45 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Studio Nadezhda

Confession
in 5 parts (42 min, 45 min, 41 min, 39 min, 43 min)
1998, 210 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Studio Nadezhda, Roskomkino
with the participation of Lenfilm

The Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn
1998, 180 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Studio Nadezhda

Dolce...
1999, 61 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Bereg (Russia), Quest (Japan)

Elegy of a Voyage
2001, 47 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Idéale Audience (France), Bereg (Russia),
The Kasander Film Company (Holland)

The St.Petersburg Diary.
Mozart. Requiem
2004, 70 min, colour, BETACAM SP, Stereo
Bereg, Sterkh Film Company (Russia), RAI 3 (Italy)

THE FILMS FROM GORKY

Russia, 1971-1978, screening format beta SP, original format 35 mm b&w

These films were created by Alexander Sokurov before or during his VGIK student years. He does not consider them a part of his filmography. These works, intended to be broadcast by the regional TV of Gorky, were not to carry the proud name of documentary films. For their creators, they were just TV programs, and the people who worked on them most often were being given no distinction in the credits (the "common tomb" of the TV slang). These documents of the very origins of Alexander Sokurov, who got his first cinema education within an unsophisticated milieu of the TV workers, give us a notion of his 'pre-stylistic' period, where the personality of the future great filmmaker reveals itself in spite of means and environment.

The most earthly concerns

Duration: 30 minutes
Year: 1974
Producer: NTR*
Original format : 35 mm

The car gains in reliability

Duration: 15 minutes
Year : 1974
Producer: NTR
Original format : 35 mm

Radio Code RLN

Duration: 25 minutes
Year : 1975
Producer: NTR
Original format : 35 mm

The last day of a rainy summer

Duration: 30 minutes
Year: 1978
Producer: NTR
Original format : 35 mm

*NTR is the present name of the Gorky public television channel (Nizhni Novgorod)