Real-time cinema:
Russian ark and Birdman

Regina Khanipova

Profesor: Dr. Sergi Sánchez

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Facultat de Comunicació

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Resum / Resumen: Un análisis comparativo de dos películas digitales de una toma única: Russian ark y Birdman

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Abstract: A comparative analysis of two digital ‘single-take’ films: Russian ark and Birdman

Keywords: digital, Russian ark, Birdman, single-take, real-time cinema, Nicholas Rombes, Rodowick
Through the cinematic experiment of the digital long take, great attention to the camerawork and mise-en-scene, two directors: Sokurov and Inarritu create a cinema of sensations that challenges the film theories on historical representation, signification and narrative. The aim of this essay is to explore how digital cinema has changed film’s relation to the indexicality, time and space, while analyzing *Russian Ark* (2002) of Sokurov and *Birdman* of Inarritu, two films that reflect on the nature of cinema, digital in particular.

Alexandr Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* (2002) creates a cinematic space that makes past, present and future meet in a single take of ninety minutes. Russian Ark is the first full-length feature film in history to record a continuous shot without compression onto hard disk. The film is a poetic documentary about the Hermitage, as a space of history traversed by timeless lines of artistic creation. Within this ‘timespace’, high-tech digital equipment aligns with three hundred years of Russian history. Without any contractions in time Sokurov traps his audience in this single space of real time, which increases the film’s isolation in the single space of the Hermitage.

Within this space the film examines its own relation to the history of cinema and its theories on time. Even though Russian Ark is presented as a film “about the Hermitage, for the Hermitage,” as quoted by Sokurov (www.russianark.spb.ru/eng/, accessed on 01.04.2015) it cannot go unnoticed that Russian Ark inserts another strand of Russia’s heritage into this ‘hermit’ space of architecture, painting, sculpture, literature and poetry, music and theatre; namely cinema.

By means of isolation of time, *Russian Ark*, the first ‘one-shot’ feature film, produces a connection between two distinct notions on cinematographic art. On one hand, Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of ‘intellectual montage’ and on the other, André Bazin’s idea of the ‘long take’. Russian film director Eisenstein (1988, p. 13-23) was interested in cinema’s capacity to create ‘cognitive affects’ through conflict and juxtaposition. In the collision of dissimilar images, film was able to create new concepts in the mind of
the viewer. As he explained himself: “the collision of two factors gives rise to an idea” (1988, p. 19). For Eisenstein montage was not only the essence of film as a serious art form but also the unique method to create ‘intellectual cinema’, to create cinematographic philosophy.

A completely different view on film art was provided by Bazin, one of the major French film critics in the 1950s and co-founder of Cahiers du cinéma, who defined the art of cinema as “objectivity in time” (1967, p.169). “To lay bare the realities” cinema would have to make use of the ‘deep focus’, in which all objects in the film are in focus, and the ‘long take’, in which the camera captures reality as it reveals itself naturally without any editing. The long take was for Bazin the true form of film art, just as montage was for Eisenstein.

Russian Ark can be regarded as a visual manifest for the long take that declares a deliberate break with Eisenstein’s renowned montage techniques. At the same time, however, Sokurov’s isolation of time through the single shot creates a poetic logic that resists Bazin’s idea of the long take, for whom the film image should add “nothing to the reality” (1967, p. 44). According to Bazin the one-take film image does not deform reality, “it forces it to reveal its structural depth, to bring out the preexisting relations who become constitutive of the drama” (1967, p.44). Russian Ark’s long take, however, produces an isolated timespace in which history is reinvented and the continuous flow of time creates a nonlinear sensation of the past. This is an altogether different Bazin’s idea of reality.

Lev Manovich (2001) considers Eisenstein’s techniques of montage in relation to simulation and new media technologies. He argues that simulation technologies invert Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical montage. Instead of carrying out the film’s mediation through the collision of shots, the immediacy of simulation technology creates a transparent text. According to Manovich, virtual image is there for viewers on the screen, but the mode of production that renders the reality (that is, the processes
behind the scenes) is synthesized via the interface of the computer to offer the illusion of a seamless reality. He refers to this as “the aesthetic of continuity” (2001, p.142). Manovich points out that, “Compositing in the 1990s supports a different aesthetic characterized by smoothness and continuity. Elements are now blended together, and boundaries erased rather than emphasized” (2001, p.142). In other words, simulation technology arranges the components within a shot and renders them in montage in a fashion to create a seamless film image.

In a similar vein, D. N. Rodowick’s (2007) critique of simulation technologies investigates whether digital cinema can express duration. Specifically, drawing upon Russian Ark, Rodowick notes, “The key to resolving the discrepancy between Russian Ark’s self-presentation and its ontological expression as digital cinema is to understand that it is a montage work, no less complex in this respect than Sergei Eisenstein’s 1927 film October” (2007, p.165,). Rodowick identifies a contradiction in Russian Ark’s experiment with the long take because it does not directly capture physical reality. Rather, it relies primarily on many “digital events” which involve digital capturing, synthesis and compositing. In this sense, the long take does not “embalm time” as Bazin argues. Rodowick (2007) concludes that analogue film has a different relationship to duration than digital cinema because of the mechanical and chemical processes that it uses in capturing the passing of time.

The long take in Russian Ark is an unique experiment in that its images are rendered mathematically via the binary code of computer language; whereas traditional photography captures light as it comes through the lens and penetrates the emulsion of the film, thus leaving a physical trace of reality. In addition, it is argued by Sean Cubbits (2004, p.33) that the smallest unit of cinema has changed from being a temporal unit (frame) to being a spatial unit (pixel), thus the digital image is fragmented into a mosaic of picture elements, whose individual values are open to any number of programmable transformations. Therefore, the pixels could be vertically manipulated in post-production while layering new images with the existing ones.
Tilman Buttner, Sokurov’s cinematographer in the interview with Louis Menashe (2003) claims that in the end of the film, the shot when the camera shows the outside view of the River Neva from the window of Hermitage is digitally inserted as the actual shots of the water are of the Baltic Sea that Sokurov and his Buttner shot separately.

This brings us to Inarritu’s film’s *Birdman* that is comprised of multiple shots that are made to seem, as though it is a single, unbroken, 119-minute film. The film explores his protagonist Riggan Thompson’s (Michael Keaton) inner battle between man and movie star. A committed actor, who hasn’t achieved the critical success he longs for, Riggan will always be best known for “Birdman,” a successful superhero franchise he starred in 20 years ago. Now, nearing age 60 and grasping for relevance, the movie star is writing, directing and starring in a stage adaptation of Raymond Carver’s story collection “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” But he doesn’t speak the language of the theater, and it shows -- on the stage and in the fear written on his face.

The space of the St. James theatre that the camera movement explores, moving from the dressing rooms to the stage and back, is there to create a messed up sense of place. It is well illustrated in the video essay of Joost Broeren and Sander Spies (https://vimeo.com/123830921, accessed 10.04.2015) how the internal logic of that space keeps shifting. As an example, they analyze the location of the Riggan’s dressing room in relation to the stage. When Riggan decides to go to the stage, he goes out of his room, turns left out of the door, walks down the hallway, goes down the stairs, and takes left, then another left, then gets to the stage. In contrast, when his manager Jake decides to go to the same place, leaving from Riggan’s dressing room as well, he turns right and right again and left through the doorway, down the stairs and ends up on stage. The film is full of mismatches of space. Another example discussed is the staircase, which changes its position on the way up and on the way down. In addition, the scene when Riggan goes to meet his daughter and passes the hallway on
the way to the room where his daughter is, they have a fight and after he goes back using the same hallway but ends up on the stage.

The meaning that the space takes in the film is linked by Broeren and Spies to the influence of Kubrick’s film *The Shining*, that is known for its crazy interiors, for example, the gold room, which exceeds the size of the outside of the building that it is supposed to be in. “We don’t consciously notice this inconsistent spaces, while we are watching the film, but they add to the sense of dread that permeates its main character when he slowly goes crazy”. In case of *Birdman*, the continuously inconsistent space of the theatre is adding to the sense of aimlessness that defines Riggar as a character.

As well as space, *Russian Ark* and *Birdman* take a step further in treatment of time. Unlike films that tell a linear, chronological story, they have anything but a linear chronology, even though they are done as single-take films. As we follow the Marquis de Custine through Hermitage in Russian Arc, we drift between different epochs of Russian history, from the present day to the reign of Nicholas the Second to the reign of Catherine the Great. This ‘time travel’ avoids normal chronology, and instead, the film passes back and forth through time, without even conventional flashback indicators. According to Rodowick (2007), time is treated here as a spatial phenomenon, in that time, like space, can be crossed in any direction.

Similarly, in *Birdman* we also see jumps in time: for example when Michael Shiner (Ed Norton) and Sam (Emma Stone) are at the top of the stage discussing theatre and the Michael’s attitude towards acting, the camera moves down the stage to show that there some works going on in preparation of the play. The camera goes back to Sam and Michael and when they start kissing, moves down again to show that on the stage the next day’s theatre show is already taking place, with Michael being an active participant. Although, the film is not a real single take, the cuts are hidden and digitally edited in order to create an illusion of uninterrupted continuity. In other words, the temporal continuity in both films is matched by the spatial continuity.
Because there is no cut, the past and present cannot be separated from each other, nor can the imagined from the real.

*Russian Ark* and *Birdman* could be considered as ‘films about cinema’, that reflect on its nature. They bring the fundamental paradox of real time cinema: as they follow the rhythms and sequence of natural time, they appear to be more “naturalistic”, however they also foremost the theatricality of performance. The audience is always aware of the intense choreography of the camera and the actors. Tilman Buttner in his interview states that the shooting involved enormous amount of preparation: there were 40 electricians that would prepare the lighting in the rooms, hundreds of actors and extras had to be brought together and directed for the action. (Menashe, 2003) This is the case with *Birdman* as well, Emma Stone, in an interview with Jimmy Fallon, recalled how a six-minute take of the scene where Riggan first meets Mike was ruined after she walked around a corner too quickly (Flagstad, 2015).

The films in themselves reflect on the theatricality. In one of the scenes of *Russian Ark*, Catherine the Great is watching the theatre rehearsal on the balcony, after being quite satisfied with the rehearsal and due to her urge to piss, she runs out of the theatre to the corridors of the museum where the narrator and Marquis Custine meet her. Custine compares Russia to a theatre, looking at the characters passing, he claims “What actors! And what costumes!” “All the scenes in the movie are set in the Ermitazh, as the events oscillate between the museified representation of history and its “live” development and theatricalization” (Kujundzic, 2003).

Similarly, *Birdman* consists of several scenes of the theatre plays in action and the rehearsal, and in one of the scenes Michael reveals to Sam that he doesn’t pretend on the stage, he pretends in every other place, but not on the stage. Nicholas Rombes points out that spectators start to observe the logic if montage and editing very profoundly: “watching films like *Russian Ark* we perhaps think to ourselves, here is where a cut would be, or the director has moved the camera into a darkened corner for
a few moments to buy himself time— the momentary darkening of screen substitutes for an edit” (2009, p.25) *Birdman* plays out as if live—a single, unbroken sequence that moves through time in a way that challenges the capabilities of the human body. Only when intoxicated can we miss a day and resurface as if no time had passed—but *Birdman* does precisely that on several occasions. And perhaps cinema is indeed a form of intoxication: joyful, mind-altering and pregnant with the risk of dependency.

This mix of reality and illusion is also constructed in the film of Inarritu by the use of a voice, alter-ego Birdman that tells Riggan how being a superhero movie star validates him above all these theatre fails, while chasing him for his narcissism. The inner voice also visually breaks out on to the screen as Riggan flips into fantasy sequences, meteors crashing to earth, battles breaking out and he flies around NYC. At the first place, use of the alter-ego is used to show the inner thoughts and to enter the subconscious of Riggan.

Fantasy sequences that emerge when *Birdman* appears, refer to Riggan’s current perception of the world. As we discover from this sequences what Riggan is currently thinking, later we understand why Riggan wants to kill himself, which is due to the failures with the play. Moreover, Inarritu constantly moves between fantasy and reality as if they were the same thing in order to show cinema’s power over society: theatre might well add gravitas and credibility to a performer, but these days no one at all is anything unless mediated by the screen, whether that be at the movies or on Twitter. The fear of being irrelevant has now become the fear of fading from our screens.

_Birdman_ explores the binary oppositions of reality and fantasy, of actor and character, of theatre and life, the borders of which are barely noticeable. According to Rodowick, “In digital capture, the indexical link to physical reality is weakened, because light must be converted into an abstract symbolic structure independent of and discontinuous with physical time and space” (2007, p.117). For Rodowick, digital
privileges space over duration; whereas analog film “transcribe[s] rather than represent [events]” in its direct contact and rendering of light and space (2007, p.116). For Rodowick, the instant diffusion of digitalization suggests a new relationship to speed, duration, and history. The past, in this sense, stays within “our historical present” (2007, p.146). In other words, spatial and temporal continuity of Russian Ark and Birdman makes explicitly clear the simultaneous coexistence of ‘moments’ that Deleuze calls ‘sheets’ (2005, p.54) of time, “films in real time about unreal time, where the past is always the present” (Gambrell, 2003, p.31)

Therefore, Russian Ark not only acts as a ‘vessel’ of the past, but also as a site of the present, visited by twenty-first-century tourists and the inhabitants of St. Petersburg; friends of Sokurov for example, the present director of the Hermitage, Mikhail Piotrovsky, and ballet dancer Alla Osipenko, who was once Rudolf Nureyev’s dance partner. As an archive of art the ‘ark’ is also a site for the future, as Sokurov states in an interview: “only the creation of the finest art, architecture, music and literature can sustain the idea of a greater humanity, and give it a point of anchorage for the future, a safe haven from the storm.” (www.russianark.spb.ru/eng/, accessed on 01.04.2015)

With this last remark in mind it is striking to see how Russian Ark lures its viewers into a sensation of nostalgia. There is a strong sense of melancholy in the film’s representation of the past that is underlined by one of Sokurov’s gloomy statements about the film’s final image of the stately crowd at the end of the ball: “As they head downstairs, we feel that they are going to fall, and I can’t do anything to prevent them from falling. This is what makes me sad. Everything has already happened.”

As such, Russian Ark does not just create a space of nostalgic stasis but a space of change that embraces Elizabeth Grosz’s ideas on the creative quality of time: “Memory, sensation, consciousness […] involve the past’s persistence in the present, the power of transformation that ensures that objects, and especially subjects, are not what they once were, but are in the process of becoming more” (2004, p.162). When time is conceived as an infinite process of becoming directed towards the future, the sensation of memory reveals that nostalgia is not created by art repeating images of the
past (Baudrillard, 1994), but by the logic of representation that transforms mediated repetitions of the past into a copy. The postmodern scenario sketched by Baudrillard creates an echo of representation that mourns for an infinite loss of the original. Baudrillard’s idea of the simulacrum as a copy of a copy maintains the idea of the past as a static space of facts which can be retrieved through faithful rendering. Memory, as described by Grosz on the other hand, acting as a productive space of transpositions between past and present, overturns the effect of representation, and creates a simulacrum that is capable of displacing any idea of copy. Likewise, Rodowick argues that the instant transmission of digitalization suggests a new relationship to speed, duration, and history. The past, in this sense, stays within “our historical present” (2007, p.146). The computer is not representing physical reality, but simulating it through its decoding of binary numbers; whereas film captures the unfolding of time in a direct one to one relationship.

It is argued by Kujundzic that “Russian Ark is a unique film which puts on display something that can be generalized as the very mechanics of history: it takes place uniquely, for the first time, and it takes place as an originary doubling. It reminds us that, all history happens as a singular iteration, as a repetition, but only once” (2003). The writer refers to the Derrida’s notion of ‘iterability’ (when a sign or a mark is able to reproduce itself) and links it to the new approach to for understanding historical events. Russian Ark features the Russian history just from the vision of high society elitist imperial Russia.”

Despite the fact that single take approach functions as synonym of real time and real history, the absence of cuts deprives the spectator of the possibility of seeing from “another point of view. Film’s technical characteristics turn out to be putting the blinders that turn into inability to see something else. Sokurov ignores all the representation of the Soviet times, explaining to his cinematographer that he just wants the Tsars, and the gold, and the art.
In conclusion, during the age of digital technology, cinema has taken new approaches towards realism and representations of time and space. Films like *Russian Ark* and *Birdman* are shot in the aesthetics of a single take. Despite the fact that both films use the more or less the same technic, the reasons for it vary according to each film. Sokurov, in *Russian Ark* tries to challenge the autonomous representation of history by arranging different epochs in a non-linear and non-chronological way. Inarritu, in his turn, uses the continuous shot as a cinematic trick to show that our fantasies are continuous with our reality, even if, like Riggan, we are but shadows full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.
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