

senses of cinema



Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre, 1796 (Hubert Robert, 1796) for the reconstruction of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre (Hubert Robert, 1796)

Alexander Sokurov's *Francofonia*: Museum Studies

👤 Alex Munt 🕒 March 2018 📁 Cinema and the Museum 📄 Issue 86

— Abstract:

*In this contribution, Alex Munt focuses on the third installment in Russian director Alexander Sokurov's museum trilogy, 2016's *Francofonia*, a work set predominantly in the Louvre. For Munt, our understanding of *Francofonia* can be enriched by an analysis of the paintings shown in the film and*

the historical context in which they came to be included in the museum's collection. For Munt, the juxtaposition of this canonical content with Sokurov's experimentation with new digital filmmaking techniques lends the film a hybrid, playful quality that is formally located between the cinematic essay and the poetic documentary.

Museums never "are". They are always "becoming".¹

In recent years a spate of "museum films" have been produced as cinematic portraits of the grand European art museums and galleries. The list includes: *Museum Hours* (Jem Cohen, 2012), *The New Rijksmuseum* (Oeke Hoogendijk, 2013), *Vatican Museums 3D* (Marco Pianigiani, 2014), *The Great Museum* (Johannes Holzhausen, 2014), *National Gallery* (Frederick Wiseman, 2014) and *Francofonia* (Alexander Sokurov, 2015). Most of these films operate within the confines of the observational documentary genre. That is, they are site-specific and eschew conventional devices such as voiceover narration, non-diegetic sound and formal "talking head" interviews. *National Gallery* is delivered from the master of the form: veteran filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. He says, "I try never to start a film with a predetermined, or ideological, point of view".² In contrast, the cycle of museum films from Russian auteur Alexander Sokurov are of a different ilk altogether. They are hybrid forms, at the interstice of narrative and documentary, which arrive loaded with "ideology". His films in this genre include: *Elegy of a Voyage* (2001), *Russian Ark* (2002) and *Francofonia* (2016) as a trilogy of museum films which unfold (respectively) at the Boijmans Museum (Rotterdam), The State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg) and The Louvre (Paris).

In the press-kit for *Francofonia* Alexander Sokurov speaks to his “dream of making a cycle of art films with the Hermitage, the Louvre, the Prado, the British Museum”, which suggests more films are to follow.³ Sokurov’s museum films are located between the cinematic essay, the poetic documentary and the “docudrama”. From Sokurov’s trademark narration, delivered in a melancholy tone, confirms him as an artist with strong views on the significance of art (in general) and (more specifically) the ongoing relevance of European and Russian art history. Sokurov avoids contemporary art entirely in his discourse and does not stray far from the canon of Western visual art with an emphasis on the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. His sensibility resists the 20th century altogether which delivered to the art gallery: Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop-Art, Dada and Fluxus – not to mention their contemporary incarnations in versions of performance art, video and electronic arts which flood galleries today. In literature Sokurov takes his cue from the 19th century – Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Flaubert, Dickens or Bernard Shaw. In the visual arts from antiquity to the High Renaissance and Romanticist movements.

In Sokurov’s museum films to date *Russian Ark* takes precedence due to the technical virtuosity of its production. The film was rendered in an uninterrupted 86-minute digital take, “traversing 36 rooms and halls of the Hermitage, it required four years of development, over 1,000 actors and extras, 22 assistant directors, and countless technicians.”⁴ Whilst *Francofonia* borrows from its predecessor, in some ways, it avoids the spectacularity of a durational cinematic form. *Francofonia* represents (for Sokurov) a return to a more ruminative, essayistic and montage-driven form consistent with his earlier museum films. What is consistent is his use of historical re-enactment and performance using ‘ghosts’ of the past who return to narrate their story to camera. Sokurov’s *mise en scène* is, at once, spatially sparse yet opulent with respect to historical wardrobe, make-up and art direction. In *Francofonia* the ghost of Napoleon (Vincent Nemeth) follows in the steps of the Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreyden) in *Russian Ark*. Sokurov retains a presence as the narrator for each film and appears on camera (albeit briefly) in *Francofonia* in a more self-reflexive representation. *Francofonia* is the most baroque of Sokurov’s museum films in its hybrid aesthetic which enfolds historical re-enactment, live-action, animated sequences, archival media and digital effects. So, whilst Sokurov remains a classicist, when it comes to his artistic taste, he is a filmmaker clearly at comfort with the elasticity and possibilities of new digital cinema. A juxtaposition of historical “content” with contemporary cinematic form and techniques lends a playful quality to *Francofonia* as a valuable addition to his oeuvre.

Whilst the narrative spine of *Francofonia* centres on the Nazi Occupation of the Louvre during World War II – this is just one layer (albeit a significant one) in what proves to be an expansive cinematic account of the museum's history. The quiet hero of the film is French civil servant Jacques Jaujard (Director of the Louvre) who adroitly manages to stall the flow of artworks to Nazi Germany. The *Musée du Louvre* has been active in telling his story prior: in films such as *The Man Who Saved the Louvre* (Jean-Pierre Devillers, 2014) and *The Louvre at War* (Jean-Claude Bringuler, 2000). And whilst the (unlikely) collaboration between Jacques Jaujard (Louis-do de Lencquesaing) and Occupation Officer Count Franziskus Wolff-Metternich (Benjamin Utzerath) presents a dramatic premise for the film – it occupies only around half of the film's duration which devotes equal energies to a dense *museological* account of the Louvre. In this sense, Sokurov exploits the Jaujard-Metternich framework as a kind 'trojan horse' inside which he manages to smuggle an account of the Louvre: from its medieval era, to the Revolution and its formation as a public gallery, to the role of the Louvre in establishing museum practices of today. My take on *Francofonia* forms an interdisciplinary analysis of the film – cinema as museum studies.⁵ Here, I am indebted to art historian Andrew McClellan who writes on the "invention" of the Louvre as a public museum and its significance in defining a set of museum practices of architectural expansion, acquisition and display of artwork and formation of attitudes towards an art-going public.⁶

This idea of Alexander Sokurov's films as museum studies (on screen) is not one altogether new. In an extra feature on the DVD of *Russian Ark* art historian Christopher R. Marshall finds, "the central character of the movie is the museum" with the central question being asked, "What does a museum mean to us today?"⁷ Sokurov's focus in his museum films is the passage of time itself – as it relates to art history – which is repackaged as cinematic time – dense with information. For Jeremi Szaniawski Alexander Sokurov does not "yield to the modern audience's laziness" but instead takes the position that "watching a film is not only an enlightening service performed by the director, it is a sacrifice consented to by the viewer, who gives one or two hours of his life to watch the film."⁸ With this in mind this article proceeds via an essayistic mode and a re-telling of *Francofonia* with an emphasis on artworks from the Louvre collection in order to further unpack the museological dimensions of the film.

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At the start of *Francofonia* we meet Marianne (Johanna Altes), symbol of the French Republic, as she pirouettes across the Denon Wing of the Louvre to halt in front of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of Medusa* (1819). In dialogue with Sokurov (as narrator) she recites the revolutionary motto *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. This phrase speaks to the formation of the public Louvre which was founded as the *Musée Central des Arts* on the first anniversary of the French Republic in 1793. Sokurov's reply is less than optimistic: "My dear Marianne, I'm not in the mood for humour." With a sardonic tone he suggests that idealism may be one thing, while social and political reality is another. The camera roves across the surface of the Romantic period painting – of a scale which anticipates cinema. During the production of *Francofonia* Sokurov was given unfettered access to the Louvre and (consistent with his other museum films) he opted to shoot after-hours in the museum *sans* the art-going public. Sokurov's spartan *mise en scène* in the empty gallery spaces lend an abstract, and timeless, quality to the film. And the chiaroscuro seen in the palette of the paintings is mirrored in the images captured by cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel.

In the museum films of Alexander Sokurov the art museum is framed as a fortress of culture. This stands in opposition to critique of the art institution on bolder terms. For example, Michaela Giebelhausen finds that (for the avant-garde) the art museum is derided "as a cemetery where art and culture go to die."⁹ This is a view shared by the late Robert Smithson who described museums as "mausoleums for art", with this resistance finding form with his iconic site-specific earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970).¹⁰ Sokurov holds a more conservative view, shared with many historians and curators, that the museum is a place "removed from life's vicissitudes, that works and artifacts live on to tell their stories of past civilizations as well as reflecting on our own."¹¹



The Raft of Medusa (Théodore Géricault, 1819)

In *the Raft of Medusa* the eye is drawn to an apex of bodies, atop corpses, adrift at sea on a makeshift raft. The subject of the painting is derived from a factual event and was deemed political work at the time as a critique of French colonisation. It portrays an incident, in 1816, when a navy ship headed for Senegal was shipwrecked at the hands of an incompetent captain of the *ancien régime*. With a shortage of lifeboats the survivors were left to build a raft not fit for the open sea – to disastrous consequences of brutality, cannibalism and death.¹² This French Romanticist painting was ambitious with respect to its subject and form, and the dramatic pyramidal composition of figures would later inspire Eugène Delacroix' *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). For Sokurov, this painting finds parity with the entanglement of art and power at the Louvre. He says, “Museums can conceal the improper behavior of power” – with the notion that it has long been the remit of artists to render impropriety visible to a wider public in material form.

Next the ferocious waves in *Medusa* give way to those in a video image depicting a freight of shipping containers ploughing rough conditions at sea. The cut is from Romanticist painterly brushstroke to (digital) glitch aesthetics. The captain of this (present-day) ship communicates with Sokurov across a flailing Skype connection. Sokurov sits in a compact apartment. He is captured subtly in long shot, or in shadow altogether. The apartment looks like one we might imagine to be his own – and in fact it is the filmmaker's St. Petersburg apartment. A montage of framed pictures on the walls, columns of books stacked high, a solitary writing desk, post-it notes scrawled with ideas. A glitch close-up of the captain. He says, "Something important in the containers... things from a big museum." Sokurov quips, "It's not human dragging art across the oceans." And it is later that the context for this remark is given in relation to the historical transit of artworks to the Louvre as trophies of war. Frantic shots of oceanic give way to a drone shot which rises above iconic Parisian rooftops in search of its target. "I've been thinking about this city a lot, lately... The Louvre is here somewhere," Sokurov says, as the camera hones in upon the museum – which in museological terms stands as "the greatest collection of art ever assembled under one roof."¹³

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Summer 1940. Archival footage. German forces wander the desolate streets of Paris which has been declared an Open City. The crisp uniforms of the Nazi soldiers. A fleet of planes survey the city from above. With an armistice in place Paris is saved the fate of its European neighbours whose cities are decimated in the conflict. Hitler points off-screen. A cut to archival images of the Louvre. Pure Kuleshov. Hitler's voice is dubbed to comic effect: "Ah! There's the Louvre! It always fascinated me it's where it belongs." An extra wide shot of the Louvre complex. A reconstructed image of the Louvre which shows gardens where the iconic glass pyramid stands today. WW2 military planes in the sky (with the aid of digital effects) then a number of drone shots spliced together with vision of the contemporary Louvre. The scale of the museum dwarfs the pedestrians wandering below in the courtyard. Sokurov says, "It sometimes seems museums don't care what happens around them... as long as they're left in peace". Next, the ghost of Napoleon Bonaparte appears, cloaked in historical garb, and he peers through a set of ornate doors inside the Louvre. *Francofonia* folds backwards in time from the middle of the 20th century to the Napoleonic era to reveal the *genealogy* of the museum. Writing on Sokurov's *Russian Ark* Nancy Condee notes, "history is subject to montage, but the film is not" but this time around Sokurov embraces montage to help with an expansive weave of museological time.¹⁴

In *Francofonia* Sokurov opts for historical re-enactment to describe the (imaginary) encounter between Jaujard and Wolff-Metternich. He gives a backstory for each character constructed from the archive. Inside the Louvre, Jaujard (Louis-do de Lencquesaing) peers through a door and the cut is to a historical painting of the Grand Gallery. A slow dissolve and the camera-pans to an archival image of this space evacuated of its contents. This sequence reconstructs the wartime gaze of Jaujard inside the museum. The archival image dramatic: sepia in hue, high-contrast, it shows an architecture of shadows akin to a frame of German Expressionist cinema. Gilded frames on the walls without their artworks. Empty frames leaning against the walls and strewn across the floor. The names of the evacuated paintings are scrawled on the walls as a record of installation. Jaujard has ferried the Louvre's masterpieces to provincial chateaux for safekeeping. "All museums must prepare for war" says Sokurov. And later in the film a reenactment shows the visit of Wolff-Metternich (Benjamin Utzerath) to a castle which dates to the reign of Louis II Du Bouchet. *The Raft of the Medusa* in storage.



Winged Androcephalous Bull (721-705 BC)

Jeremi Szaniawski proposes a convergence between museum and filmic form with the shared aims of “conflating a diverse set of temporalities within a block of space and time, and infusing them with new life.”¹⁵ Sokurov finds playful ways to do this. In the Oriental Antiquities department he offers a wide shot of a child (six or seven years old) dwarfed by a pair of *lamassu* (winged bulls) which guard the entrance to the room (*Winged Androcephalous Bulls*, 721-705 BC). In 1847 the Louvre founded an Assyrian Museum to display the antiquities excavated by Paul-Emile Botta in Dur-Sharruki (Assyrian capital in the reign of Sargon II and present day Khorsabad in Iraq).¹⁶ These dramatic, heavy carved figures form testament to the scale of the ancient Assyrian palaces. And this speaks to Giebelhausen's idea that in a museum, “temporality is suspended” in a place where “past, present and future remain intimately connected.”¹⁷ For Sokurov, the ancient *lamassu* are “Messages from 700 BC.”

In the next sequence Sokurov uses an animated map to convey the journey of antiquities from the port of Basra (Iraq) to Marseille (France) *en route* to the Louvre. This is intercut with the pixelated video images of a cargo of artworks being battered at sea seen earlier in the film. Sokurov narration speaks of the “museum fever” of the “Old World” in relation to the international trajectory of artworks – mostly as the spoils of war. Today the remit of museums is vastly different with regard to the ethics of acquisition and display. Whilst the restitution of artworks back to their rightful owners has been a long standing for prestigious museums in recent years there is evidence of progress. In early 2018 Sebastien Allard (Director of Paintings at the Louvre) announced a new space for the permanent display of artworks looted by the Nazis in WW2 where “many {artworks} had belonged to Jewish families whose homes were raided during the Nazi occupation, or who were forced to sell art to survive or to flee the country”¹⁸. For Corinne Bouchoux, French author of a 2013 report on the restitution of artworks at the Louvre, “museums have really undergone a cultural revolution” [Ibid]. This is evidence of a new century, and new approach to issues of restitution, as art institutions confront their own (at times dubious) history of acquisition of artworks.

The idea of a museum existing as a “diverse set of temporalities”¹⁹ is applicable both to a museum’s content and the evolution of its architectural body. In *Francofonia* the physical transformation of the Louvre complex forms a central part of the museological description of the museum. Here, Sokurov portrays the Louvre as an organic entity subject to architectural transformation from the Renaissance to the 1980s Grand Louvre ushered in by President Mitterrand. With modernist imprudence the glazed pyramids of US architect I.M. Pei have reinvigorated the Louvre to provide a more contemporary image, and brand, beyond its baroque facades. Sokurov says, “The Louvre has outgrown its clothes” over an image of the glass pyramids. Then a cut below the terrestrial surface of the courtyard reveals the real work of the Grand Louvre project which was the excavation and connection of the Louvre’s historical pavilions. A cut to images of tourists in *Halle Napoleon* which Sokurov has colour graded using a desaturated blue to counter the archival footage presented. In the bowels of the Louvre Marianne makes transit in a golf buggy. An “entire underground city” notes Sokurov. This sequence recalls an early prototype for the museum film by Nicolas Philibert: *La Ville Louvre (Louvre City, 1990)* in which the filmmaker was given access to the museum during this time. Philibert’s film was made some thirty years prior to the new spate of museum documentaries and provides an intriguing portrait of an art institution in flux. The conclusion of *Louvre City* is powerful. It presents a montage of portraits of the Louvre’s workers from the floor cleaner to the curator. And the end credits are a testament to an unspoken manifesto of expansion: 30,000 works of art; 15 km of underground tunnels; 30,000 m² of exhibition spaces and 1200 employees – and growing. The museum as metropolis. And today the Louvre project expands beyond Paris: to the Louvre Lens appendage in the north of France and further abroad to the new Louvre Abu Dhabi. Like other museums the Louvre is a market savvy public institution which competes in the global art market.

Francofonia folds back in time. The figure of Pierre Lescot is introduced as a Renaissance man: “Mathematician, painter, priest and architect”. At the will of Francis I (and continuing under Henri II Lescot transformed what was a 12th century medieval fortress on the grounds of the Louvre to a Royal Palace of 1528.²⁰ “How long ago did it all start?” asks Sokurov. Next, back in the middle of the 20th century we see Jaujard as the guardian of the Louvre. In a historical re-enactment Jaujard oversees the removal of *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* (c. 190 BC) across a pair of timber tracks along the Daru staircase as the Hellenistic sculpture is taken for transit to the Château de Valençay for protection. Napoleon appears on the prowl. “What’s this?” he asks. Sokurov’s reply, “It’s not your trophy. It’s from later.”



St. John the Baptist (Leonardo da Vinci, 1513-16)

Another re-enactment: Sokurov recreates the archival image (witnessed earlier) of the Grand Gallery stripped of artwork. The scene is in color but the details are familiar: a cavernous space, forlorn picture frames, paint discoloration where the paintings once hung. Jacques Jaujard is captured in steady-cam. Framed in close-up and in low angle to convey a supple, bureaucratic heroism. Jaujard stops in his tracks. A solitary painting left on the walls captures his eye. This is *St. John the Baptist* (1513-16 from the High Renaissance and presumed to be the final work of Leonardo da Vinci. The museological origins of the work date to the pre-Louvre “Cabinet of Pictures” collection at Fontainebleau (in 1542) and overseen by François I.²¹ In the painting St. John is rendered in chiaroscuro as he emerge from the shadows. Sokurov cuts in to a closer view of his enigmatic expression – one likened to that of the *Mona Lisa* (1506). The face, and eyes, in the portrait give resolve to Jaujard to continue his plight to save the Louvre’s collection in times of calamity. The scene recalls an essayistic sequence shown earlier where Sokurov ruminates on the significance of European portraiture in the history of European visual art: “Who would I have been? ...had I never known or seen the eyes of those who lived before me?” For Sokurov, the grand museums – from the Hermitage, to the Louvre, and the Prado – function as architectures of *transmission*: they send and receive information across time, artworks as conduit.²²

St. John the Baptist gestures with his hands to the heavens above. Sokurov cuts to the rooftop of the Louvre. A sweeping 360-degree panorama of the Louvre complex, with Paris beyond, enfolds the passage of time within the duration of the shot (some help here from digital effects). This shot commences in the museum present then pans to the Tuileries Gardens and towards the Eiffel Tower. At this point a pair of WW2 military planes stream across the sky (digital effects) and as the circular pan comes to a close, the image digitally degrades and the Louvre is returned to an undeveloped verdant site on the banks of the Seine. Next, an animated museological sequence which reveals the history of the site from Viking occupation to the medieval fortress of King Philippe Auguste. The area once known as “Lupara” – has become “Louvre”.²³ To continue: the fortress was demolished by François in 1527 to be replaced with Pierre Lescot’s Renaissance facades appropriate for a palace of kings. Wing by wing the Louvre expands. At first at the hands of Catherine de’ Medici, then Henry IV, Louis XIII and later Louis XIV. What fascinates Sokurov is a sense of the predestination of the Louvre over time. The museum as an organic, near spiritual, entity fueled by an unspoken agreement of those in power, across the centuries, with a conviction that the Louvre project must go on. The book-end to this sequence signals the French Revolution and the future of the Louvre as a public museum.



Bonaparte Visiting the Victims of the Plague at Jaffa, March 11, 1799 (Baron Antoine-Jean Gros, 1804)

Back inside the Louvre, Marianne at the threshold of the Denon Wing. Her eyes are drawn across the room to *Bonaparte Visiting the Victims of the Plague* (Antoine-Jean Gros, 1804) which is a neoclassical painting that shows a tableau of plague-ridden soldiers admits the bloody Siege of Jaffe, 1799. A mosque doubles as a makeshift hospital. Napoleon is centre stage illuminated by a holy shaft of light from above. He extends his bare hand, against the will of the medical doctor, to console a soldier with signs of the plague. The painting documents a historical event. From the Louvre catalogue: “Bonaparte’s virtue and courage justify the horrors of war. Gros has given him the luminous aura and gestures of Christ healing the lepers in religious paintings.”²⁴ And Kate Williams in *Josephine: Desire, Ambition, Napoleon* Kate writes that it was Napoleon’s belief conviction that, “if one had control over the mind, the rest would follow” with a rationale that “any man who was afraid of the plague would immediately catch it.”²⁵



Bonaparte Crossing the Alps (Paul Delaroche, 1850)

Napoleon takes Marianne by the hand and leads her towards a comparatively demure painting *Bona- parte Crossing the Alps* (1850) by Paul Delaroche. This work depicts the Emperor crossing the alps to counter the Austrian army in Italy and makes reference to the propagandistic series of paintings completed by Jacques-Louis David (from 1801 to 1805) for Napoleon. The Delaroche reflects the trend to realism in painting which surfaced in the mid-19th century and where David depicted Napoleon in this event on a muscular horse with his arm raised in conquest – this later version pictures a pale and weary Napoleon slumped on a blinkered mule as he is being led by a guide through the terrain.²⁶ In the painting Napoleon wears a drab grey coat, he looks older in years and holds a melancholy gaze. In *Francofonia* the wardrobe and make-up design of the film drawn from the painting with the ghost of Napoleon in a grey trench coat, of pallid complexion and with signature hat. “You don’t recognize me?” he asks Marianne. He tilts his hat in deference to the painting. Sokurov says wryly, “I’d show other paintings.” The shot is framed to favour the scale of the canvas, not the actor, leaving a diminutive Napoleon posed awkwardly at the foot of the frame. In *Francofonia* Napoleon is called-out for overstepping his historical significance, in general, and specifically in relation to the museological debt of the Louvre to the Emperor.

In 1803 the Louvre was branded the *Musée Napoléon*. Vivant Denon was installed as the museum's first director to manage a space in which "artistic war trophies are kept" as Napoleonic conquests landed the Louvre "probably the most splendid collection of masterpieces of all time."²⁷ "Suddenly the state understands that it cannot exist without museums," says Sokurov. And for Napoleon a patriotic agenda was put to work under the guise the "liberation" of grand European artworks to France with the only justification seeming to be a belief in the superiority of French culture. Andrew McClellan notes, "Napoleon cared little for the finer points of art, but he was well aware of its propaganda value" and the looted artworks were visibly paraded through crowded streets in France.²⁸ Napoleon's hijack of the Louvre, for political purpose, was made most manifest when the museum served as a "venue for hire" for his wedding – a spectacle captured in *The Marriage Procession of Napoleon and Marie-Louise through the Grand Gallery of the Louvre* (Benjamin Zix, 1810). After Napoleon's fall in 1815 a period of restitution of artworks commenced which left the Louvre a "wilderness of frames – an image to be repeated with the Nazi invasion almost a century and a half later"²⁹. Of the 506 paintings removed from Italy 248 can still be found in French museums and churches including those installed on the walls of the Louvre. In a curious museological footnote many looted artworks found new homes in national museums in lieu of the location from which they had originally been removed and it was precisely this phenomenon which precipitated the museum boom of the early 19th century in European capital cities. As discussed earlier in this article the ongoing restitution of artworks has been taken seriously by the global art museums of today.

Whilst the Louvre collection swelled under the rule of Napoleon it proved "museologically unadventurous" writes Andrew McClellan – in comparison the fifty-year period from the exhibition of royal artworks at the Luxembourg Gallery (1750-1779) to the Revolutionary Louvre (1793) which was a defining era for museum practices.³⁰ Whilst often aligned with new Republic plans for the Louvre as a public museum was as much a project of the *ancien régime* as it was a product of Revolution. In *Inventing the Louvre*, McClellan posits that it was in fact the stewardship by the Comte d'Angiviller during the reign of Louis XVI (1730–1810) that paved the way. He notes that under d'Angiviller, "between 1775 and 1789 over 200 new paintings were acquired, many of them masterpieces that occupy pride of place in the Louvre collection to this day."³¹ And whilst the inefficiencies of the *ancien régime* prevented a timely public Louvre what did ensue was a period of unprecedented museological activity which established the foundations of museum practices in curation, display and museum operations.³²

Alexander Sokurov draws on the life of Hubert Robert to confer a lesson in “museum studies” for the Louvre. As a painter Robert was responsible for visions of the Grand Gallery which have come to define this space as the most significant in the contemporary Louvre. It was the first wing of the royal palace to be demarcated a public space for the viewing of art.³³ In this context *Francofonia* trades on the earlier film by Sokurov *Robert. Schastlivaya zhizn* (*Hubert Robert: A Fortunate Life*, 1996). His fascination with this historic figure is evident, an artist, curator and visionary of the public Louvre. Robert was a member of the Académie from 1766; exhibited at the Louvre Salon from 1767; was elected a member of the Commission for the “Future Louvre” from 1778 – as part of a band of architects and painters selected by D’Angiviller to create “a unique moment in Europe.”³⁴ As well as a curator of the royal collection Hubert Robert was accommodated as a long-term Louvre resident until 1806. In *A Fortunate Life* Sokurov narrates the moment Napoleon came to power and evicted Robert and his wife from their Louvre apartment, of some 25 years. Robert died shortly later, “falling down by his easel” says Sokurov who sides by Robert, not Napoleon, as visionary of the Louvre. *Francofonia* details Robert’s paintings of the “Imaginary Louvre” from the late 1780s. Sokurov (with film editor Hansjörg Weißbrich) uses dissolve edits to animate Robert’s multiple visions of the Grand Gallery: *The Grande Galerie Undergoing Restoration, 1796-1799*, *The Grande Galerie of the Louvre (1801-1805)*, *Project for the Transformation of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre, around 1789 (1796)* and *Project for the Transformation of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre*.



The Grande Galerie Undergoing Restoration, 1798, 1799 (1799)



The Grande Galerie of the Louvre (1801-1805)



Project for the Transformation of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre (circa 1789)



Project for the Transformation of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre (1780s)

The history of this space is telling as the Grand Gallery had long linked the Old Louvre with the Tuileries Palace – some vast distance near half a kilometre. Prior to being repurposed as an art gallery it held scale models of France's towns on display for defence purposes.³⁵ The first Robert painting on screen shows the Grand Gallery under renovation (1796 to 1799) since shortly after its opening (in 1793) as a public gallery it was closed for safety modifications to the structure. Interestingly the work shows the high vertical windows through which daylight seeps – a scenario less than ideal for the display and maintenance of artworks. A series of decorative columns, used as sculptural plinths, demarcate the longitudinal axis of the space. Next another Robert painting of the Grand Gallery which shows copy-artists working in the gallery. A closer view of the canvas reveals a “copy girl” on a trestle with brush and palette in hand – a tradition which still remains today at the Louvre for artists to exercise their skills.³⁶

The paintings of Hubert Robert are arranged achronologically in *Francofonia*. Next, is a pair of Robert paintings which return to the “Imaginary Louvre” project of the late 1780s and reveal the museological function of these works to establish new modes of museum practice. The zenithal (overhead) lighting would become default for museum architecture to follow and this set of paintings form testament to the magnitude of Robert’s vision for a public Louvre. As late as 1937 the Corinthian columns (depicted on the walls in the painting) were installed in the Grand Gallery – evidence of Robert’s legacy in the contemporary Louvre.³⁷ A painting depicting the Grand Gallery being used as public space follows. For Sokurov, the Louvre “wasn’t a road, but the path of European art. Step by step. Year by year... everyone in a row, eye to eye.” The revolution gave the final impetus to the reality of a public art museum and on August 10, 1793 the Louvre was declared the *Musée français* opening with a public display of 537 paintings and a range of sculptures and *objets d’art*.³⁸



Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins. Pendant to Project for the Transformation of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre (Hubert Robert, 1796)

Hubert Robert's apocalyptic *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* (ca. 1796) closes this museum sequence. The painting shows the Grand Gallery in ruins, whilst a fiction, represents a core theme of *Francofonia* which attests to the resilience of the Louvre across time. A resilience to consecutive regimes of power, to civil unrest, to revolution and (during World War II) to near-catastrophe. A recent exhibition on the work of Robert was staged at the Louvre (it travelled to the NGV in Australia in 2016). The Louvre catalogue notes that, "Despite the disasters of history, these paintings reflect a certain confidence in the restorative power of art, through the intermediary of museums."³⁹ For Michaela Giebelhausen writing on this painting, "Suddenly we are time travelers and the sole survivors of our own culture as he invites us to contemplate the passage of time and the inevitable passing of civilizations."⁴⁰ With this in mind it is little wonder Robert holds a special place for Sokurov who (in the medium of cinema) continues this task with his cycle of museum films. Giebelhausen draws our eyes towards the central axis of the painting where we find a solitary artist (in the ruins of the Grand Gallery) sketching the *Apollo Belvedere* (120-140 AD). Here the inference being that even amidst the most turbulent of times resides the human faculty and endeavor for art.

* * *

The *Mona Lisa* is reserved for last. Marianne sits next to a deflated Napoleon (the film has defeated him). She voices the phrase again: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. A stubborn Napoleon resists: "It's me! All of it! This." "Without me, there would be nothing." But it's a hollow claim. For Sokurov the succession of emperors, politicians, curators, artists, architects and administrators of the Louvre are all transitory and at mercy to the strange will of this grand museum evident across time.

This article has been peer reviewed.

Endnotes

1. Peter H. Welsh, "Re-configuring Museums," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 20:2 (2005): 106. Cited in Christopher R. Marshall, "Re-imagining Meaning in the Contemporary Museum: From Things that Go Beep in the case to the artist ex machina" in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth C. Mansfield, (New York and London: Routledge, 2007). [↗](#)
2. Jason Di Rosso, "Frederick Wiseman speaks about documentaries, 'National Gallery'", ABC Radio National, *Final Cut*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/finalcut/frederick-wiseman-speaks-about-documentaries,-national-gallery/6282622>
[[HTTP://WWW.ABC.NET.AU/RADIONATIONAL/PROGRAMS/FINALCUT/FREDERICK-WISEMAN-SPEAKS-ABOUT-DOCUMENTARIES,-NATIONAL-GALLERY/6282622](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/finalcut/frederick-wiseman-speaks-about-documentaries,-national-gallery/6282622)] [↗](#)

3. *Francofonia*, Press Kit <http://medias.unifrance.org/medias/74/92/154698/presse/francofonia-presskit-english.pdf> [HTTP://MEDIAS.UNIFRANCE.ORG/MEDIAS/74/92/154698/PRESSE/FRANCOFONIA-PRESSKIT-ENGLISH.PDF] 
4. Jeremy Szaniawski, "Russian Ark: Imperial Elegy" in *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox*, (London and New York: Wallflower Press 2014), p. 166. 
5. 'Museology' and 'Museum Studies' as the study of museums are largely interchangeable terms with the latter being the preference in Australia and the UK 
6. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). 
7. Christopher R. Marshall, "Museum of Memory: Illustrated Lecture", DVD Extra, *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002) (Mad Man Entertainment). 
8. Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, p. 5. 
9. Michaela Giebelhausen, "In the Museum's Ruins: Staging the Passage of Time", in Suzanne Macleod, Laura Hourston Hanks and Jonathan Hale (eds.), *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions. Museum Meanings* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 234. 
10. *Art & Place: Site-Specific Art of the Americas* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2013). 
11. Giebelhausen, "In the Museum's Ruins", op. cit., p. 234. 
12. See <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa> [HTTP://WWW.LOUVRE.FR/EN/OEUVRE-NOTICES/RAFT-MEDUSA] 
13. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, op. cit., p. 198. 
14. Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), cited in Jose Alaniz, "Crowd Control: Anxiety of Effluence in Sokurov's Russian Ark", in Brigit Beumers and Nancy Condee (eds.), *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011) p. 162. 
15. Jeremi Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, op. cit., p. 166. 
16. Pierre Quondam, *The Louvre*, trans. Barbara Shuey (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983), p. 8. 
17. Giebelhausen, Michaela (2012) 'In the Museum's Ruins', op. cit., p. 234. 
18. Aurelien Breeden, "Art Looted by Nazis Gets a New Space at the Louvre. But Is It Really Home?", New York Times, Feb. 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/world/europe/louvre-nazi-looted-art.html> [HTTPS://WWW.NYTIMES.COM/2018/02/08/WORLD/EUROPE/LOUVRE-NAZI-LOOTED-ART.HTML] 
19. Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, p. cit., p. 166. 
20. See <http://www.louvre.fr/en/histoirelouvres/history-louvre/periode-3#flashcontent> [HTTP://WWW.LOUVRE.FR/EN/HISTOIRELOUVRES/HISTORY-LOUVRE/PERIODE-3#FLASHCONTENT] 
21. Quondam, *The Louvre*, op. cit., p. 36. 
22. See: "Museum Films: Alex Munt on *Francofonia* and Frederick Wiseman on National Gallery", The Final Cut, Radio National, October 7, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/finalcut/alex-munt-on-francofonia-and-frederick-wiseman-on-museum-hours/7891978> [HTTP://WWW.ABC.NET.AU/RADIONATIONAL/PROGRAMS/FINALCUT/ALEX-MUNT-ON-FRANCOFONIA-AND-FREDERICK-WISEMAN-ON-MUSEUM-HOURS/7891978] . 
23. Quondam, *The Louvre*, op. cit., p. 5. 
24. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/napoleon-bonaparte-visiting-plague-stricken-jaffa> [HTTP://WWW.LOUVRE.FR/EN/OEUVRE-NOTICES/NAPOLEON-BONAPARTE-VISITING-PLAGUE-STRICKEN-JAFFA] 
25. Kate Williams, *Josephine: Desire, Ambition, Napoleon* (London: Hutchinson, 2013), p. 126. 
26. Delaroche's version is based upon a factual account published by historian Adolphe Theirs (1845). See: <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404874/napoleon-crossing-the-alps-may-1800> [HTTPS://WWW.ROYALCOLLECTION.ORG.UK/COLLECTION/404874/NAPOLEON-CROSSING-THE-ALPS-MAY-1800] 
27. Quondam, *The Louvre*, op. cit., p. 5. 

28. See McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 236-238. [↗](#)
29. Ibid., p 240 [↗](#)
30. McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, op. cit., p. 2. [↗](#)
31. Ibid., p. 61. [↗](#)
32. See Ibid., pp. 54-55. [↗](#)
33. McClellan, *The Art Museum*, op. cit., p. 18. [↗](#)
34. See Andrew McClellan, "Musée du Louvre, Paris: Palace for the People, Art for All", in Carole Paul (ed.), *The First Modern Museums of Art: the Birth of an Institution in 18th – and early 19th – Century Europe* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2012), p. 217. [↗](#)
35. McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, op. cit., p. 33. [↗](#)
36. The image of a female artist in this scene prompts the question of distorted gender bias in Sokurov's museological history of the Louvre which is framed in relation to successions of (male) kings, architects, artists, dictators and civil servants. A revisionist history along lines of gender suggests a site of further research into museum films [↗](#)
37. http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=5719&langue=en
[[HTTP://CARTELFR.LOUVRE.FR/CARTELFR/VISITE?SRV=CAR_NOT_FRAME&IDNOTICE=5719&LANGUE=EN](http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=5719&langue=en)] [↗](#)
38. McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, op. cit., p. 95. [↗](#)
39. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/expositions/hubert-robert-1733-1808a-visionary-painter>
[[HTTP://WWW.LOUVRE.FR/EN/EXPOSITIONS/HUBERT-ROBERT-1733-1808A-VISIONARY-PAINTER](http://www.louvre.fr/en/expositions/hubert-robert-1733-1808a-visionary-painter)] [↗](#)
40. Giebelhausen, "In the Museum's Ruins", op. cit., p. 235. [↗](#)

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