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Festival films

Petersburg magic and Rio gangs

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A couple of gems from the festival of independent film at Telluride

CINEMA today is all too often just about plot or special effects. So films that are true to the medium, successfully weaving together sound, image and time to tell a really cinematic story are always special. On show at Telluride earlier this month were two remarkable examples.

Alexander Sokurov's "Russian Ark", which opens in the United States in November, explores the 300-year-long history of the Hermitage museum in a single "breath", an uncut 90-minute walk through 35 of its rooms and halls. This has never been done before, and the result is, among other things, a magical rumination on what film can achieve.

Tilman Büttner, the director of photography who operated the steadicam used to shoot the film, has turned the camera into one of its main characters, a contemporary film maker trapped in a journey through Russian history, with Mr Sokurov himself speaking its part. As we move from room to room an array of different scenes come up—Peter the Great whipping one of his generals, for example, or present-day visitors enjoying the works of art. The camera is invisible to the film's other characters, apart from a fellow time-traveller, a 19th-century French diplomat. The relationship between the camera and the diplomat, against the backdrop of some of Europe's greatest works of art, reveals the main theme of the film, Russia's uneasy link to its past and to Europe.

In contrast to the expanse of the subject, the film was shot in a single day, using almost 1,000 stage actors, hundreds of extras, two orchestras and 22 assistant directors. Cast and crew had not rehearsed together until production day. Yet they have turned out a seamless film. If the camera were to shake, Mr Büttner would lose his tight containment of the scene and the audience would remember the film maker's conceit. The dynamic between Mr Sokurov's lyrical movement through historical time and Mr Büttner's real-time movement of the camera creates the tension needed to sustain the long shot.

If Mr Sokurov chooses a single technique to tell a complex tale, then just as interesting is Fernando Meirelles's multi-tiered "City of God", a film about gang violence during the 1960s and 1970s in Rio de Janeiro's *favela* of the same name. "City of God", which will be released in January, is a fine example of Latin America's recent film renaissance. It was shot on location, using only natural lighting. The actors were mainly non-professional children from the *favelas*; the script was only there to suggest and guide the dialogue.

This naturalistic approach has echoes in the film's structure and tonal palette. Mr Meirelles divides the film into three parts. In the first, life is simple and crime relatively innocent. The compositions are ordinary, the angles conventional. The actors are given strict marks—literally, tape on the ground marking their positions—and the cinematography is warm. In part two, violence is on the rise, yet there

is still a sense of freedom and possibility. Mr Meirelles uses more hand-held cameras as well as narrow lenses and bright Technicolor film to create a sense of excitement. The actors are given fewer marks and more freedom to improvise their lines. In the final third, chaos reigns and hope is dead. Mr Meirelles wanted to create the effect of losing control. The tone is monochromatic, the camera swings wildly and the actors have no marks at all.

Far from being a distraction, these aesthetic characteristics confirm just how good Mr Meirelles is at creating energy on screen. From the opening scene, cutting quickly between black screen, a knife being sharpened and people dancing, before the camera chases off after a chicken in the alleys of the *favela*, we know that we are in the hands of a serious creative talent.

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