Ludic Digitality:
A. Sokurov's *Russian Ark* and A. Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer* as Cinegames

VLAD STRUKOV
University of Leeds

Abstract: The article explores A. Sokurov's *Russian Ark* and A. Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer* as cinegames, i.e. examples of hybridization of media—film and computer gaming—and associated narrative styles, forms of presentation and identity construction. *How I Ended This Summer* is a psychological thriller and *Russian Ark* is an experimental film that explores Russian imperial history. The two films share an interest in Russian and Soviet modernity both in its artistic and technological manifestations, and they utilise digital technology in order to explore new types of subjectivity emerging as a result of the imperial collapse. The analysis of the films focuses on a specific sensibility of the subject in the digital era revealed in the nuances of the temporal organisations of the cinegames. The article examines how film as a form of art responds to new forms of visuality available to the filmmaker both at the level of representation as well as a modular form of discourse, and what affects it has on the temporal composition of the films.

Keywords: Sokurov, Popogrebskii, first-person shooter, data, Soviet modernity, image as object, hybridization, digital gaze, mixed environments

The crossovers between the media of film and computer gaming can loosely be defined as three types.[1] First of all, there are games that enable the player to enter the world of their favourite films in order to interact with their environments and to re-live the pleasures of watching the original production. There are numerous examples of such crossovers; for instance, in the west there is *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and its sundry game reincarnations,[2]

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[1] I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their extremely helpful comments.
[2] For example, *The Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers* (2002, Stormfront Studios & Hypnos Entertainment) covers the events of the first two films of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* (2001 & 2002, dir. by Peter Jackson).

and in Russia[3] we find *Night Watch* and a tactical role-playing game developed by *Nival Interactive*.[4] Games in this category are part of cinematic franchises, and the process of converting cinematic narratives into computer games has been researched as part of the discourse on transmediality.[5]

In the second category, we find cinematic adaptations of popular computer games that offer a similar opportunity of enjoyment. As in the first case, such products are part of transmedial aspects of contemporary culture, a phenomenon, which, in application to post-communist spaces, was explored in Issue 5 of *Digital Icons*.[6] Such films are less known to general public because they often appeal to the aficionados of particular computer games, for instance, *Doom* and *Resident Evil*.[7] Few films in this category have been produced in Russia so far; a good example is *Na igre* [Hooked],[8] it deploys cinematic exploration of basic principles of computer gaming, such as the use of avatars, gamers' networked collaboration, advancement from one level to another, and so forth. In academic scholarship, these types of films have become known as 'videogame films'; for example, Will Brooker argues that 'because fidelity to the original is of low priority when porting from games to cinema, direct adaptations of videogames—with rare exceptions—have little in common with the aesthetics and conventions of the source material, and resemble the game primarily only in mise-en-scene and costume design' (2009: 123). The films in the second category range from those that display spectacular visual effects at the expense of cultural context and identities of the characters (for example, *I, Robot*)[9] to those that contain some conventions, or memes, of video games, such as progression through levels (for example, the platform jumping scene in *Attack of Clones*).[10]

Stephen Keane maintains the binary logic of film and game crossovers in his study of film, convergence and new media (Keane 2007). He speaks about films as videogames and videogames as film, thus juxtaposing the two media and identifying the logic of each as it is being carried over media boundaries. What is at work is an interest in adaptation whereby the characteristics of one medium become a subject matter for their adaptation in the other medium. In this respect, Keane identifies noteworthy changes in narrative, graphics and cinematic elements, and he relates them to mathematical and visual laws that govern the media themselves (Keane 2007: 105-115).

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[3] From the audience point of view, attributing such films and games to a specific country is an outmoded and utterly useless practice since the audiences of these products—whether cinematic, or gaming—are always transnational. Therefore, choosing Russian films as a case study and discussing their national setting is a premise for the broader discussion of cinegames.

[4] *Night Watch* [Nochnoi dozor] is Timur Bekmambetov's 2004 film based on a series of novels by Sergei Luk'ianenko. The online game was released in 2005.

[5] See, for example, Jenkins 2006 and Sokolova 2009.

[6] *Transmedial Practices in Post-Communist Spaces*, issue 5, 2011, edited by Vlad Strukov et al, http://www.digitalicons.org/issue05/ (accessed 15 July 2012).

[7] *Doom* is Andrzej Bartkowiak's 2005 film based on a computer game that was originally released in 1993 by id Software. *Resident Evil*, directed by Paul W.S. Anderson (2002), is the first instalment in the cinematic adaptation of *Resident Evil*, originally released as *Bio Hazard* in 1996 by Capcom.

[8] See the review of the film in *Digital Icons* (Norris 2010).

[9] 2004, directed by Alex Proyas.

[10] 2002, directed by George Lucas.

Overlooked remain films that engage with computer gaming in ways which produce new types of experience and subjectivity altogether. They do not aim to reproduce the other medium, or the experience that was provided when interacting with the medium, but rather strive to create a completely different set of practices and identities. To me these films constitute a separate—third—category of cinegames because they do not negate the logic of one medium in favour of another, or in fact, concern themselves with the adaptation / substitution of one with another. Instead, they adopt an inclusive, creative approach to constructing new formations. Films in this category play the role of the cinematic avant-garde because they transcend the artistic form to call attention to the crisis of identity. They also release creative energy that transforms our understanding of moving image as a form of art. In fact, they problematize the available categorical apparatus which is evident in how the term 'cinema' has often been used in contemporary critique as a kind of shorthand of visual culture as such. In my analysis, I focus on the third category of films and explore how these cinegames help construct a new type of subjectivity and necessitate the hybridization of the forms, media and digital environments. I use Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (Russkii kovcheg, 2002) and Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer* (Kak ia provel etim letom, 2010) in order to argue for the emergence of a specific sensibility of the subject in the digital era revealed in the nuances of the temporal organisations of the cinegames. While *Russian Ark* has been explored by various scholars as a visual experiment contesting Russian history (see for example, Beumers & Condee 2011; Efird 2011; Eshelman 2003; Ravetto-Biagioli 2005; Hashamova 2006; Kujundzic 2003; Ostrowska 2003), *How I Ended This Summer* has only been analysed in film reviews (Hasted & Felperin 2011; Lipovetsky & Mikhailova 2010; Stishova 2010). None of these publications discusses the films from the ludic perspective. My concern is not with the ludic form *en generale* (for example, interactive narratives or spatial narration), but rather with the digital, computer-enabled games that allow for the emergence of a specific gaming universe that can be populated by characters / avatars and re-enacted with the help of player-versus-computer and player-versus-player interactions. I focus on how film as a form of art responds to new forms of visuality available to the filmmaker both at the level of representation as well as a modular form of discourse, and what affects it has on the temporal composition of the films. In addition, I demonstrate how the cross-over is informed by a specific cultural tradition: I argue that the film-game convergence is an aesthetic tool that enables the directors to explore the crisis of statehood, national identity and modernity in post-Soviet Russia. In three sections, the article explores the digital universes of *Russian Ark* and *How I Ended This Summer*, focusing on the temporal aspect of the digital gaze and interrogating various manifestations of cinegame digitality, including themes, modes of production, used technology, visualizations and characterizations.

Image 1. Historical re-enactments in *Russian Ark***.**

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark.*

Section 1: Imaginary Pasts and Disowned Perspectives: Entering the Digital Maze

Russian Ark and *How I Ended This Summer* might seem to be worlds apart. The former is set in Russia's imperial capital, Saint Petersburg, and the latter on its farthest outpost, on an is-land off the Chukotka peninsula. While *Russian Ark* offers a cinematic exploration of the Hermitage Museum and associated cultural traditions of tsarist Russia, *How I Ended This Summer* is preoccupied with the transition of the nation from the Soviet to post-Soviet era, a metamorphosis that has finally spread to the north-eastern edge of the country. The former film is a lavish theatrical performance filmed over the course of a single day in the Winter Palace using a digital camera, which recorded directly onto a hard drive; the latter film uses even more advance digital technology—RED digital cameras[11]— to create a psychological exploration of the lives of two male protagonists. In spite of these differences the films di-vulge an innate affinity which is grounded in their common interest in the symbolic value of the past. They both provide a reflection on the link between an individual's life and cultural tradition. Finally, they reveal similar methods of appropriating the digital gaze, whereby the merger between film and computer gaming is not so much a matter of technological conver-gence but rather of aesthetic hybridization that makes use of different media, value and meaning. By deconstructing the epistemological systems of the two films, I hope to demon-

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[11] RED digital cinema cameras were used for making of the film. They became available on the market shortly before the filming began. They cameras utilise a unique method of compressing audio and video files. For more information on the technical aspect of this type of cameras, please visit the company's website.

strate the process of aesthetic hybridization at work and to examine the logic of transmedial cross-fertilization.

Image 2. Navigating through the Hermitage in Russian Ark.

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark.*

Russian Ark is explicitly concerned with the issue of representation inasmuch as Sokurov uses an unusual type of 'distributed representation'. In this form of representation, a concept is not represented by a single signifier but by a network, of which only a few nodes need to be activated to trigger the whole concept (Simons 2008: 9). This type of representation is characteristic of networked social media, for example, Facebook and Vkontakte,[12] as well as computer games, especially those that include networked collaboration. *Russian Ark* exploits the principles of distributed representation by providing an assemblage of historical and cultural artefacts in the game zone of the nation. Set in the Hermitage, the film shows a zigzagged journey of a ghostly figure, Marquis Astolphe de Custine (1790-1857),[13] through the numerous rooms of the museum as well as through Russian imperial history. Created as part of the artistic celebration of the 300th anniversary of Saint Petersburg, the film is a cinematic ode to Russian pre-Soviet modernity (from the foundation of Saint Petersburg in 1703 to the Grand Ball in the Winter Palace in 1913). *Russian Ark* engages with Western art displayed in the collections[14] and inspects paintings, sculptures and interior design as emblems of Russian

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[12] VKontakte is a Russian-based social media network.
[13] De Custine is a real historical figure who played an important role in constructing a specific perception of Russia in the West. Please see Beumers & Condee 2011 and Kujundzic 2003 for the discussion of the historical aspect of Sokurov's film.
[14] The film eschews collections of the Oriental and Asian art, thus focusing explicitly on the European connection.

national history and European cultural tradition and as loci of (visual) culture per se. The underlying concern of *Russian Ark* is the nature of art and the (im-)possibility of representation of cultural memory.

Image 3. 'Historical' Marquis de Custine conversing with 'present day' figures.

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark.*

The film responds to this concern by staging a non-linear, non-chronological presentation of cultural artefacts; as the camera meanders from one room to another, and subsequently from one historical period to another, it transgresses the assumed boundaries of linear time, chronology and history. The film simultaneously constructs and deconstructs historicity by enabling the camera to record a linear, progressive reading of the spectacle of history presented in the film as a number of interlinked and interchangeable performances. Similarly, the gamer's experience of, say, a first person shooter is perceived as linear progression in what otherwise is a loose collection of game zones, actions, statistics and artefacts. Therefore, the presented spectacle in *Russian Ark* becomes the director's unique interpretation of history and memory, as would be an experience of a player of a computer game. For example, at one point in *Russian Ark* the camera shows Catherine the Great parading a whole army of actors, musicians and dancers in her home theatre.[15] A few minutes later, the camera follows the now somnolent Catherine the Great through the Winter Garden and abandons her in favour of another member of the Romanov dynasty from another historical period. So on the one hand, *Russian Ark* is deeply rooted in the historical past, only rarely allowing for the interference of the present day events and personalities; for example, it shows the current director of the Hermitage Mikhail Piatrovskii. On the other, the film focuses on the fleeting moments of

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[15] Different 'reincarnations' of Catherine the Great are played by different actors.

time whereby its essence is found in the impressions of existence registered in the numerous paintings hung in the Hermitage. Thus, the film simultaneously looks backwards and forwards, and as it transcends the ephemeral and eternal as the bases of cultural memory.

Images 4 & 5. Various reincarnations of Catherine the Great.

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark.*

By contrast, the structure of *How I Ended This Summer* is free of techniques that allow for subverting or reversing time. Instead, the film uses a psychologically tense narrative to explore the relationship between linear historical time and timeless, a-historical being in the Russian North.[16] Moreover, the emphasis of the film is on how breaks in customary causality result in sudden extraordinary leaps in existential meaning. The film shows two meteorologists working on an island off the Chukotka peninsula. The older character, Sergei (Sergei Puskipalis) relies on old methods of collecting and transmitting meteorological data. He records water and air temperatures and solar activity using what should be described as analogue methods: thermometers, barometers, as well as a pair of Wellington boots as he wades into the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean. His younger counterpart, Pavel (Grigorii Dobrygin), fully relies on modern digital technology—the computer. Perhaps in contemporary meteorological practice traditional and computerised methods are used conjointly; however, the director makes a clear point about the characters' difference in the use of technology. Pavel's actions concerning data collection are not as obvious as Sergei's actions, and as a result they cause confusion and mistrust. They are also a source of humiliation for Sergei who feels threatened by the advances of new technology, which in itself symbolises an epistemological turn that he finds impossible to embrace.

Image 6. Pavel at work, using high-tech equipment.
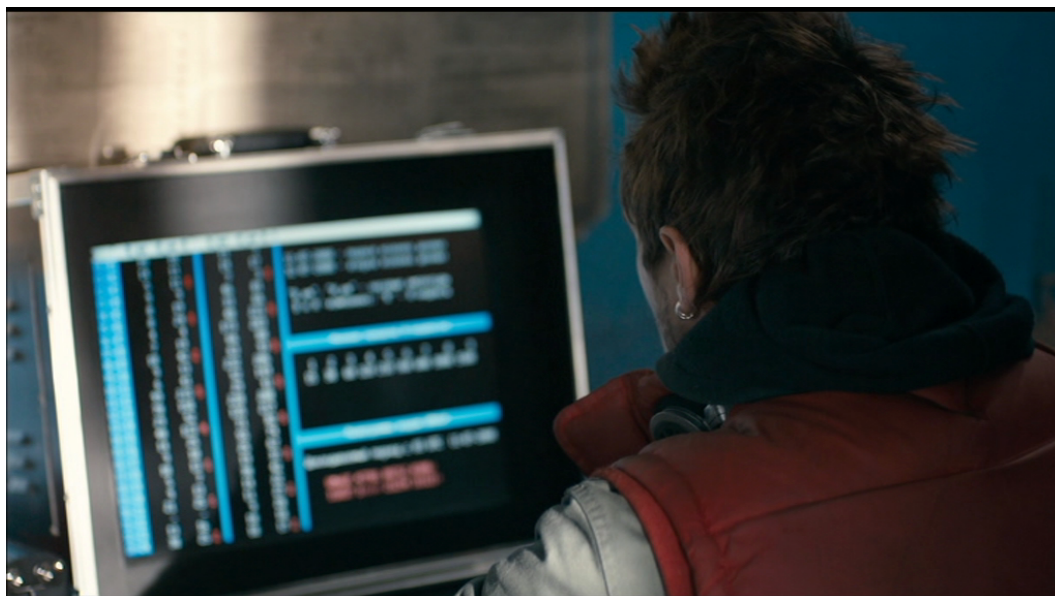
Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

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[16] The film is highly political in its examination of the Soviet past. It makes numerous allusions to Soviet works of literature, art and cinema that depict the Arctic and tell the story of the exploration of the Far North. Although the focus of this article is clearly not on such cultural connections, I would like to mention that, on the one hand, the film stresses the USSR-Russia continuity in that life in the Arctic is presented as a heroic, masculine endeavour. On the other, the director's interpretation of recent history is that of rupture; in fact, the Soviet period is symbolised by the nuclear capsule deployed on the island—it contaminates the environment and poisons human relationships. As a cancerous tumour it is there only to be removed at the end of the film.

Image 7. Sergei at work, using dated but trusted technologies.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer.*

Their ultimate job is to facilitate the transition of the meteorological station into the new era by testing the equipment that collects data using computerised technology whereby human presence will no longer be needed. Sergei's response to this change is mixed. On the one hand, the transition to new data collection practices enables him to return to the European part of Russia and reconnect with his family, wife and son. On the other, it makes his job obsolete and, as a stereotypical technophobe, he finds himself stripped of any sense of purpose that had been provided by the old technology. He reconciles the conflict between his personal and societal allegiances by taking on the personal responsibility for overlooking the transition and ensuring the history of the scientific exploration of the Far North is preserved for future generations. Thus, Sergei and Pavel represent two stages of technological modernity, analogue and digital, and subsequently two forms of epistemology whose contrasting values spur an emotional conflict between the characters. (In *Russian Ark*, the modernising development is articulated as an aesthetic principle: the digital camera documents changes in representational strategies with the film itself enabling the most advanced type of representation.)

One day Pavel receives a message from the mainland; it is intended for Sergei and informs him of the tragic death of his wife and child in an accident on their way to a holiday resort. (The crash of their airplane is a technological disaster that occurs in the film off the screen. It signifies the collapse of yet another section of Soviet modernity—its aviation industry.) Pavel fails to deliver the message to his work partner—the film makes it obscure whether he does so out of menace or in fact out of desire to protect Sergei. A series of violent confrontations follows until Pavel replaces Sergei's fish with that contaminated with radioac-

tive waste. After an unexpected and emotionally perplexing reconciliation, Sergei compels Pavel to keep the story of the attempted manslaughter secret from the rescue team; Sergei remains on the island on the pretext of overseeing the closure of the station whereas in fact he stays to enjoy solitude before his imminent death from radioactive poisoning.[17]

Images 8. The nuclear capsule 'inserted' into the northern landscape.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

More broadly, Pavel and Sergei's experience asserts a new form of translating human per-formance into digital code. Donna Haraway argues that communication systems and biotech-nologies—in this case, meteorological data, radio transmissions, computer uploads and the nuclear capsule—have made all humanity into cyborgs, translating our bodies—and I would add, our psychology—into code (mathematical, genetic, etc.) (Haraway 2004: 107). In his analysis of digital cinema, D.N. Rodowick remarks 'social identity is increasingly replaced by accumulation of passwords and codes that define location and access' (Rodowick 2001: 223). Thus, the conflict between Sergei and Pavel must be viewed as a conflict of codes, of two systems that lack an interface that would translate and transfer data between them. (In *Russian Ark*, history itself is presented as code and the purpose of de Custine—and the view-

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[17] This departure from the island is not the only one in the film. Before then Sergei makes two fishing trips to another island leaving Pavel in charge of collecting meteorological data. Thus, Sergei feels responsible for Pavel's failure to collect data as his fishing trips were driven by personal interest. These developments can be read in psychoanalytical terms as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex. At the same time, on the symbolic level, they signify the magical passing of time and the fairy-tale quality of the narrative whereby three attempts are needed in order to achieve the goal. These readings of the film inform the gaming principle underlying the narrative of *How I Ended This Summer*; the full psychoanalytical examination of the film is outside the scope of the present article.

er—is to decipher these codes, which results in the change of subjectivity and the viewer's perception of history.) The two films investigate subjectivity as a matter of trans-coding of human experience, and they do so by situating the conflicts historically. In *How I Ended the Summer*, Sergei and Pavel symbolise two historical periods, the Soviet and post-Soviet, respectively; and their conflict signifies the impossibility to translate, de-code, re-write, or re-transmit the message from one cultural system to another. Their inability to communicate is a sign of trauma caused by the ruptures in the history of Russian modernity and nationhood. In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov avoids all references to the Soviet period (with the notable exception of the scene during the siege of Leningrad) thus contesting the impossibility of inclusion of the Soviet experience in the Russian national tradition because of the completely different code it utilizes.

Images 9. Sergei departing on his fishing expedition.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

In spite of the technological and epistemological incompatibility, Popogrebskii's characters are shown to be willing to learn from each other: Sergei acquires some basic computer-mediated communication skills (for example, he begins to use 'smailik'-s [emoticons]) in his text messages to his wife) while Pavel learns about the hardships of living in complete isolation as well as its few pleasures (thanks to Sergei he discovers the delights of the Russian bania).[18] The film focuses on the divergent values of the two generations—the last Soviet and

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[18] The scene has strong homoerotic undercurrent which let some critics refer to *How I Ended This Summer* as Russian *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, dir. by Ang Lee). In fact, the director Aleksei Popogrebskii makes an explicit reference to *Brokeback Mountain* in his discussion of *How I Ended This Summer* with a Komsomol'skaia Pravda journalist (see Nechaev 2010).

first post-Soviet—represented as a conflict between the son and his (surrogate) father.[19] The existential conflict is rendered primarily as a technological one: in an ironic neo-Marxist fashion, Sokurov and Popogrebskii call for new instruments of production of knowledge in order for the society to evolve: in *How I Ended This Summer*, it is the computer that brings about the anticipated transformation, and in *Russian Ark* it is the digital camera employed by the filmmaker that enables a new—uninterrupted and unedited—reading of the cultural past. However, the films are not trapped in technological determinism, rather they use available technology to document an unstoppable social and cultural transformation, and arguably they build a case for social constructivism by utilising new technologies to reveal the change in the representational matrix of the post-industrial, digital era.

Section 2: Game Positionality and Digital Ornaments: Exploring Virtual Environments

The two films tackle the problem of technological and cultural transfer by utilising aesthetic features of computer gaming. In reference to multiplayer games and virtual worlds, Celia Pearce puts forward a few criteria that define virtual worlds created in computer games; such worlds are spatial, contiguous, explorable, persistent, embodied and populous (Pearce 2009: 18-20). Indeed, the universes of *Russian Ark* and *How I Ended This Summer* convey contiguous and explorable worlds; they provide 'a pervading sense of the geopolitical adjacencies within the world <…> and the contiguous space <…> makes them inherently explorable; players may go wherever they want, although their movements may be constrained by their level or status in the world (Pearce 2009: 18). The characters can only occupy certain segments of these worlds—game zones—and they are encouraged to explore other zones, each of which occupies a separate place on the mental map of the game/film. Such explorations precipitate challenges and imply successful completion of tasks in order to progress to a new level, for example, procuring fuel, going on a fishing expedition, escaping a polar bear in *How I Ended This Summer*, and identifying individuals and deciphering cultural codes in *Russian Ark*.[20]

Secondly, the characters are expected to perform repetitive actions that enable the universe to continue and also provide the gamer with more knowledge / power, i.e., with tokens of success which they can carry with them from one level of the game to another. In *How I Ended This Summer*, this type of repetitive task includes collecting meteorological data and transferring it to the mainland. It is Pavel's failure to collect meteorological data in time—to attend to a repetitive action required by the game rules—that results in the collapse of the system and destruction of the whole game universe.[21] To be more precise, in the film, the

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[19] For a nuanced study of the father-son theme in contemporary Russian cinema, see Goscilo & Hashamova 2010.

[20] For successful progression in the ludic world of *Russian Ark* the viewers are expected to identify various characters and historical figures on their way. De Custine's progress through the Hermitage marks completion of quests and interactions occurring in discreet spaces of the museum.

[21] A similar mechanism is at play in the popular TV series *Lost* (2004-10, created by J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber and Damon Lindelof), where the characters are meant to repeat a seemingly meaningless action—enter a numerical code into an old-fashioned computer—until one day they fail to enter the code and the hatch implodes.

system fails not because the code is not entered but rather because a false code is provided—hence a parallel is drawn to the world of *The Matrix*,[22] whereby the failures in the codes—ghosts in the machine—enable the emergence of alternative / dissent forms of being in the digital universe. Thus, the films display qualities of quests: the exploration of the game universe is one of the goals of the games and also one of the main sources of pleasure. This is a fairly neutral experience because it focuses on the interaction with the surrounding environment. This environment is, of course, structured in a specific way that demonstrates its own power structure. For example, in *How I Ended This Summer*, only Sergei has access to another island where he goes fishing. In gaming terms, he is a more experienced player who has obtained access to a different source of energy, and therefore, he is more advanced in the game. Pavel has to resort to a completely different set of skills to gain advantage in the game. As in many games, his success results in the destruction of the other player and the gaming universe.

De Custine's role in *Russian Ark* is not thematic but rather structural. His authority in the game universe gradually grows as he meets people, interacts with historical figures and inspects cultural artefacts. De Custine combines features of a few types of medial subjectivity. On one level, he is a standard character of a film production with his own subjectivity, independence and purpose. On another level, his role is akin to that of an avatar as he leads the camera and the viewer through the digital maze of the Hermitage. Although independent of the player, De Custine-avatar enables signification by means of interaction (as direct interaction with the viewer is not possible, it is substituted by his interaction with the camera). Finally, De Custine embodies the notion of the interactive play in that he functions as another player in the game universe along with the viewer and the camera. This is reflected in the transient quality of his persona: he transcends not only the vast spaces of the Hermitage (he is always on the move, only pausing for brief instances to admire a work of art or strike a conversation with a museum visitor) and fields of time (as it has been pointed out above he occupies different historical periods and in this sense he is omnipresent in ways online subjectivities are) but also different functionalities (he is simultaneously a stranger, guide and follower).

De Custine's statements and prophesies function as prompts that instruct players on the objectives and the ways to achieve them. (In video games, such prompts can be presented simply as short extracts of text, or can have a more complex form of presentation, for example, as short videos, or audio messages.) In *How I Ended This Summer* gaming prompts are delivered through the radio transmissions from the mainland (these prompts are provided in return for relevant data, and thus a causal link is established and progression is guaranteed). The breakdown of communication between the players causes the disintegration of the game universe; this collapse is irreversible and requires an external intervention for the order to be re-established. In *Russian Ark*, De Custine has the function of delivering new information to the camera / viewer: he appears at crucial moments in the camera's journey through the Hermitage, he entices the viewer into exploration of the gaming world and he also takes on the role of assessing the player's progression.

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[22] 1999, dir. by Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski.

Image 10. Inspecting cultural artefacts.

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark.*

Sokurov's film carries the logic of a first-person shooter whereby the success of the gaming adventure solely depends on the knowledge and skills of the player. In *How I Ended This Summer*, the gaming function is divided between Pavel and Sergei; in fact both of them take part in the process of collecting data, receiving prompts and ensuring progress. Therefore, structurally the film is not a first person shooter but rather a multi-player game (in fact, the gaming sequence—the metaphor of the whole film—shows clearly Pavel has other team players). As a result the role of the viewer is similar to that of another player: however, their task is not to combat monsters and achieve goals in quest missions but rather to choose between the two other players, Pavel and Sergei, that is, the viewer is involved in the game of ethics rather than the game of action.

Image 11. A view of the meteorological station from a distance.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

Image 12. A view of the station in a close range; the wires indicate that the station is connected to the outside world, i.e., 'networked'.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

The contrast between the characters and two differing types of visual apparatus is presented in the film from the very outset. *How I Ended This Summer* alternates between shots of vast expanses of the Chukotka peninsula and claustrophobic shots of the meteorological station. Presented as the classical 'nature versus culture' divide the shots accentuate the battle between the characters in the outside world as well as their inner struggles. The film also features long takes of the northern landscape: filmed on digital camera the footage was remastered in such a way that natural phenomena occur at a fast rate—a type of undercranking—a technique borrowed from documentary films about nature whereby the growth of plants is shown at an accelerated speed to make the slow transformation easily visible. The technique accentuates the slow pace of time and also draws the viewer's attention to the subtle changes in the landscape, particularly to the transformation of the light and colour. The contrast between realistic, slow-paced scenes depicting the characters on their daily chores, or later in the film struggling for survival, and fast-tracked scenes of nature that acquire the quality of abstract paintings ascertains two forms of visuality evident in the film. They are indicative of the lapses in perception that are induced by the trickery of northern light as well as the changes in the human psyche. *How I Ended This Summer* aims to replicate the 'mediated truth'—the experience of not being on a natural science expedition but being in a film about a natural science expedition such as those shown on the National Geographic Channel. (Similarly, *Russian Ark* simulates a museum promotional video rather than an actual visit to a museum.[23])

To fill in time and fight his boredom, Pavel plays computer games. The film shows directly his progression in the gaming universe: as though the viewer steps into the virtual world of computer gaming. There are two instances of such presentation in the film. In the first case, the viewer sees Pavel's avatar chasing enemies in a derelict city, and its architectural design appears recognisably Soviet. In the second instance, Pavel's gaming character dies because he enters a zone of radioactive contamination. Pavel manoeuvres his joystick with two aims—acquisition (of weapons, powers, health) and destruction (of enemies, monsters, obstacles)—with the overall goal to preserve his life and health in order to reach new levels of play. These are, indeed, computerized projections of his actions in the 'real' life.

These two instances of the use of gaming footage serve a story-telling function. They remind the viewer of the radiation threat on the island and hint at the future developments. They also symbolically link different threads of Soviet and post-Soviet technological modernity. Pavel's avatar is shown shooting monsters against an enormous backdrop of a mural rendered in the style of Soviet urban decorative art. The mural shows Soviet scientists who are celebrated by the people of the nation. The neglected state of the mural indicates the passing of the Soviet modernity.

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[23] Conversely, computer games reveal simulation of the mediated experience, that is, a view through a camera length rather than the human eye, for example, the golf game *Links 2004* (Microsoft 2003) incorporates the analogue occurrence of lens flare.

Image 13. A screenshot of game footage used in the film.

Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

The film also puts emphasis on the link between the Soviet cyber experiments and nuclear programme,[24] and therefore, the removal of the nuclear core at the end of the film should be a read as 1) the closure of the Soviet nuclear programme that underpinned the exploration of the Soviet North, 2) the removal of the Soviet dated technology, i.e., as final progression into a new phase of modernity, and 3) as the final step in the computer game whereby the purpose of the quest has been achieved.

The gaming footage used in the film was not specially produced for *How I Ended This Summer* but rather borrowed from an existing computer game,[25] S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (GSC Game World, Ukraine-Russia, 2007-present).[26] The name of the game makes a reference to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film which in itself was an adaptation of a novel written by brothers Strugatskiis. The acronymized title of the game stands for 'Scavengers, Trespassers, Adventurers, Loners, Killers, Explores and Robbers' and thus represents the main roles / gaming functions that can be adopted by the players. Unlike in other role playing games, the players do not get additional abilities or statistics; instead they obtain artefacts that increase or decrease their capabilities. The gaming universe is plentiful with artefacts and the players can customise their collection of artefacts and thus build their own way through the game. The play area corresponds with the Chernobyl exclusion area and the game story is centred on the effects of radioactive contamination in the aftermath of the 1986 disaster.

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[24] For an historical discussion of the connection between Soviet nuclear and cybernetics projects see Gerovitch 2002.

[25] I am grateful to Aleksei Popogrebskii for confirming this point in my argument.

[26] For a succinct discussion of the game and transmedial practice see Sokolova 2012.

Images 14 & 15. Screenshots of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. real game footage.

Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1snNQI8PHs&feature=related (accessed 25 July 2012)

The setting includes dilapidated buildings, abandoned towns and various exclusions zones inhabited by mutants. The game universe consists of anomalies that occasionally change the layout of the game and its commanding principles. By including the footage from the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. game, Popogrebskii achieves a few objectives. First of all, he appeals to the younger part of the audience by providing them with a familiar visual experience—the game—in unfamiliar surroundings—the Chukotka peninsula, thus inverting the perceptions of the 'real' and 'virtual', or in fact signalling for virtualisation of all experience, whereby virtualisation is defined as a form of mediating social and cultural practices. Secondly, the director uses the gaming footage as a visual referent for the construction of Pavel's identity: the character undergoes his own 'S.T.A.L.K.E.R. transformation' from being an explorer to adventurer, then loner, trespasser, scavenger, robber and, finally, killer.[27] Thirdly, the film emphasizes the role of the post-Soviet traumatic legacy associated with Soviet nuclear experiments: in fact, the zone of nuclear trauma shifts from Chernobyl to the Chukotka peninsula to demonstrate the scale of contamination and the scale of the post-Soviet demise.[28] Finally, the gaming footage defines the visual aesthetic of the film because it renders the island, meteorological station and its inhabitants by utilising the digital gaze that subverts concepts of embodiment and strategies of affective involvement.[29]

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[27] On the narrative level his transition is marked by the following actions: Pavel is first shown exploring the island and making adventurous trips to its remote parts; he experiences isolation and introverted inspection when Sergei goes away; Pavel trespasses Sergei's privacy by failing to convey the message about the death of his family; as he is forced away from the station he begins to scavenge food until eventually he begins to steal from Sergey, and kills him with poisoned food.

[28] Aleksandr Mindadze offers a cinematic exploration of the Chernobyl disaster and traumatic memory in his 2011 film *Innocent Saturday* [V subbotu].

[29] Other instances of the use of computer-induced imagery in the film include the uncanny scene of Sergei's 'mutation'. Having feasted on poisoned fish, he sits at the dinner table and looks out of the window; outside Pavel is trying to assess the danger of the situation and catches Sergei's gaze. His face appears to be distorted with the left side of his face, especially, the ear, being disproportionably stretched. The distortion is a macabre hint at radioactive poisoning; however the rational explanation is that the character is looking through a double-glazed window. At the same time, this is a common visual effect that can be achieved when re-mastering images on computers, using, for example, Photoshop. This sinister and simultaneously ironic use of visual reference places the computer imagery in the long tradition of pictorial representation with Vincent Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (1885) being one of the most obvious referents in the 'mutation' scene. Therefore, the film effectively confirms the place of digital imagery in the European tradition of visual representation. In other words, digital imagery is not seen as a breakaway point in the visual tradition, or as a context in which visual traditions overlap—a case of media convergence—but rather as a natural extension of the tradition, i.e. a singular ocular interface. The director strengthens his point by inserting and subverting other references: for example, he playfully alludes to the biblical story of Jesus Christ feeding the hungry with just a few fishes; the smoked fish in the film also appears as if taken from Petrov-Vodkins' painting. (Popogrebskii's interest in classical art is particularly evident in his earlier film *Simple Things* [Prostye veshchi] (2003). Its plot centres on a painting by Repin. It is never clear if the painting is real or fraudulent which helps the director comment on contemporary Russian society unable to tell real values from fake ones.) Thus, the director critically engages with the issue of image valence in the era of digital reproduction.

Images 16. A helicopter is carrying the decommissioned nuclear capsule away from the island.
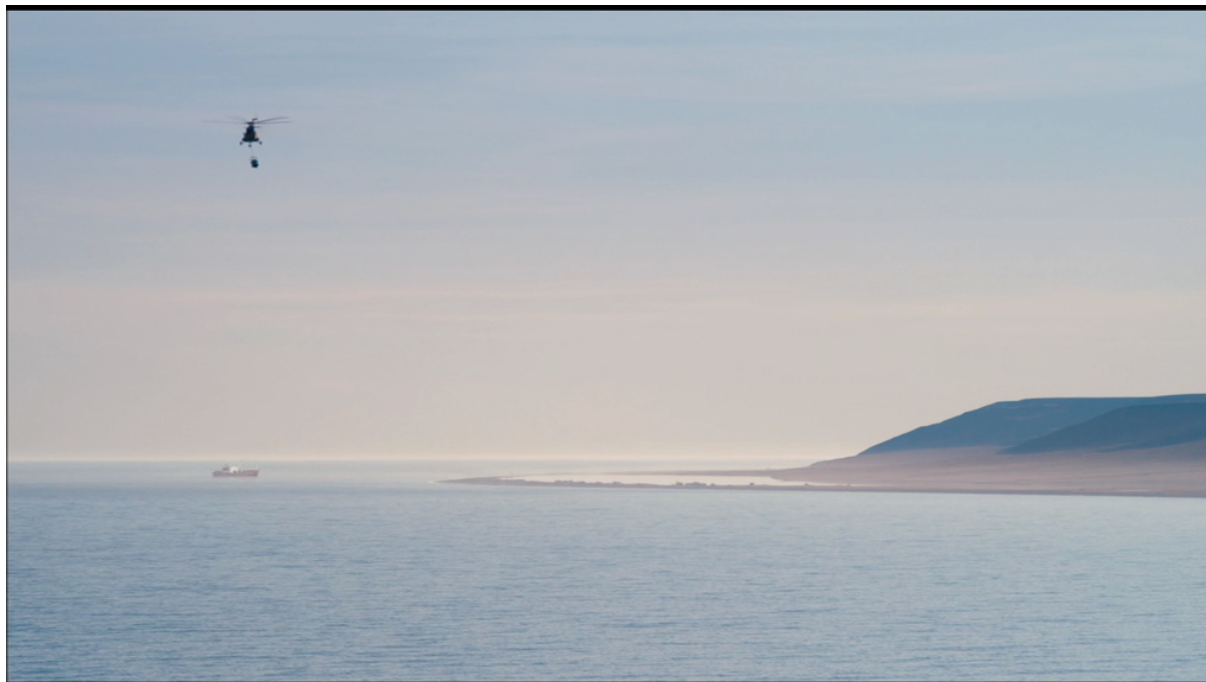
Source: Aleksei Popogrebskii's *How I Ended This Summer*.

Section 3. Visual Traces and Engaging Tactics: Exiting the Game World

In *Russian Ark*, time is suspended because of the clutter of events, costumes and paintings—as if they form an impassable terrain of culture. The abundance of artefacts and practices eliminates temporal cohesion since objects and characters can be laid out at random. In *How I Ended This Summer,* it is rather the scarcity of manmade items that allows for the suspension of time. The void is filled with impersonal data; incomprehensible to the viewer unfamiliar with the science of meteorology, these data serve as the evidence of the impossibility of comprehending nature, and human nature, too. In the film, the manipulation of data brings about confusion, uncertainty and fear; as Georges Coppel observes in his mathematical study of perspective, 'precise data often hold more mystery than vague expressions, perhaps because they suggest that no attempt at rigour will ever lessen the fundamental strangeness of the world' (Coppel 1982: 270). Just like meteorological data is mounted unsorted and unclear, so are the grades of human emotion: while the conflict escalates, its roots and patterns remain mysterious (for example, the viewer never learns about Sergei's previous experiences on the island, experiences that encourage his colleagues on the mainland to show signs of grievous concern, to the extent that they order for an urgent launch of a rescue mission). The data is a means 'to crack the nature's code'; in this sense, the film is similar to the atmosphere on Tarkovsky's planet Solaris whereby technological means do not help humans comprehend the nature of the universe, and particularly the inner world of the human mind. In

How I Ended This Summer, the interiority of the being, with its complex network of desires, traumas and fears, is shown against the northern landscape that privileges simplicity, austerity and openness.

In both films, a distinction is made between the natural time, the human time and the time of the machines. In *How I Ended This Summer*, the northern summer helps suspend the time: as the sun never fully sets down, the temporal rhythm is maintained thanks to mechanical means— Sergei relies on an old-fashioned clock and Pavel uses a modern wrist watch—as well as natural cycles: Sergei is aware of the breeding time of his favourite fish, and so he prepares for his fishing expedition. However, it is the link with the mainland that purports the linear historical time: regular radio transmissions provide the meteorologists with a sense of time and its empowering duration. When the conflict between Pavel and Sergei erupts, it moves their attention away from the nature cycles, and it disrupts their link with the mainland: as a result they find themselves completely suspended in time. It is at this point the conflict gains its main force and emerges as a mythological, eternal conflict between two men, two generation, two types of deities, one that maintains the link with tradition and the established way of life, and the other—Prometheus-type—whose goal is to revolutionise matter. Pavel experiences the force of time most acutely: he is compelled to abandon the station where his watch, computer and other technology are housed, and he tries to survive on scarce food. As his link with the mechanised time of humankind is broken, he struggles to establish a connection with the transcendental time that is ruled—like binary code—on the premise of just two categories, life and death.

In *Russian Ark,* the camera transcends the opposition of life and death by enabling the scenes from the past to be re-enacted in the present. Sokurov shows that each object and cultural artefact releases its energy in the form of memories, associations and desires. The Hermitage becomes the vessel for the memory of the nation as well as the history of humankind, whereby individual experiences make a complex fabric of simultaneous interpretations. The camera time, or the time of the machine, is contrasted with that of the humankind presented as a collection of artefacts, as well as that of natural time. At the very outset of the film we are reminded of the natural light and the world outside of the museum. In fact, the opening scene with couples arriving at the Winter Palace provides a slow transition into the world of art and artifice that the Hermitage houses. However, it is only once during the film that the camera leaves the interiors of the museum: it follows Catherine the Great and her companion across the winter garden in the palace. In this scene, like in Popogrebskii's film, the viewer is confronted with an austere winter landscape as the camera moves along a path in snow with barren trees overhanging the passage. As the camera slows down it releases Catherine the Great and her companion from its clasp: the focus shifts from the running couple onto the fading light of the Northern winter. The humans and the trees appear as elements of some ghostly design; the air is still and the camera records the mesmerising reflection of light on snow-covered surfaces. The free gliding in the Winter Garden visualises the perception of time and space in computer games: while appearing and functioning as open and continuous they are actually predetermined and possessing boundaries. In fact, the assumed openness of the space—in reality the garden is merely a walled space within the Winter Palace—accentuates the immobility of time: like the ice-covered trees in the winter garden, the arte-

facts in the Hermitage are objects frozen in time. The digital gaze of the camera splices through the infinity of cultural tradition; it becomes an anthropomorphised assembler of events, experiences and times.

Russian Ark is obsessed with paintings displayed in the museum: the film explores them in a variety of ways—by making De Custine comment on some of them, inspecting others in an extreme close-up, and enabling other characters to respond to paintings by staging their own performances.[30] At the core of this exploration is Sokurov's engagement with the structure of history and validity of the past. In the postmodern manner, Sokurov offers alternative readings of the past, employs flashbacks as well as flashforwards to accentuate the fluidity of time, and presents distant historical events as running concurrently, thus, stripping history of any assumed linearity and logical cohesion. Instead, history emerges as a multitude of temporal patterns, each revealing an emotion, a practice and a tradition. The real work of history is concealed behind the lavish screen of performance in Russian Ark; the theatrical extravaganza, the opulence of the museum and zigzagged course of the camera highlight the arbitrariness of time in Sokurov's film. Contrariwise, in How I Ended This Summer, the director strips the narrative of any elaborate detail; the barren landscape and the austere emotional landscape of the main characters allow for a minimalist presentation of time.

Image 17. A stroll in the Winter Garden of the Hermitage.

Source: Aleksandr Sokurov's Russian Ark.

The films employ two differing procedures: How I Ended This Summer shows how the world can be deconstructed into a set of numerical data; conversely, in Russian Ark worlds (of art

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[30] See Strukov 2009 for the discussion of such performances.

and culture) are assembled from available data (for example, memories, citations, portraits, etc.). At the same time *Russian Ark* employs the procedure of collecting artefacts that is also used as the gaming principle of S.T.A.L.K.E.R., which in its turn underpins the structure of *How I Ended This Summer.* (In the broader theoretical context the preoccupation of the two films with the nature of data is a marker of transition from one form of cinematic language to another. Lev Manovich defines this transition as a move from a live-action film that tells a story—here Manovich borrows from Christian Metz—to what he calls abstract, or digital cinema (2010: 245-54). Manovich conceives of this new type of cinema in terms of genre, hence he employs Metz's concept of super-genre (Metz 1976: 75-105). I consider genre-medium relationships at the very end of this article and this consideration is prompted by the concept of data that the two film in question advance.) No matter what the outcome of the procedure is, both the films achieve the effect of making data concrete, palpable and manipulatable. In other words, they turn data into objects; as the two films are predominantly concerned with one type of data—the image—the final outcome of the procedure is turning the image into an object.

When the image becomes an object in a stream of parallel events—in case of *Russian Ark*, in a stream of reconstructed historical events taking place concurrently in numerous rooms of the Hermitage—the realm of psychological realism is completely abandoned. By using the voice-over technique,[31] Sokurov initially distances the viewer from the camera as s/he becomes aware of a different identity attached to the optical locus of the camera. By turning images into objects, Sokurov eventually turns the viewer into the camera and, thus, makes the role of the viewer participatory. He makes the camera an active part of the scene and not an instrument of voyeurism and/or surveillance.[32] The active, haptic role of the camera-viewer is similar to that of the virtual camera in computer games since it is not only an apparatus of vision but also an ocular interface that enables the player to interact with space. Interaction is understood here literally as a point of contact between two or many substances, or points of matter, and also metaphorically as a means to connect visually with other parts of the environment. Hence, the effect of the active role of the camera is perceptible in that it transmits—not shows—the environment around it with the help of the very environment, for example, the world around the camera appears to be moving on its own and the camera merely to be tracing its moves unless the player/viewer initiates new movement by manipulating the camera via an input device.

Russian Ark breaks the boundaries between the 'real' and 'virtual', 'cinema' and 'computer gaming'. One of the distinct markers of this cross-boundary operation is that *Russian Ark* lacks a point of entry into the virtual world, that is, it does not employ a convention of entering into the gaming world that can be manifested in a number of ways—as a portal, dream sequence, etc.—rather it *does* already occupy the 'other' world, thus eliminating all

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[31] The film's narrative relies on the comments made by the off-screen narrator, Sokurov himself.

[32] I previously argued that Sokurov's fundamental interest is the nature of art and spectatorship. I showed how Sokurov utilises the myth of Orpheus—both as the metaphor of art as well as a narratological construct—in order to make the role of the camera active and also to ascribe it the position from within, that is part of the channel of vision 'Marquis de Custine—camera (Sokurov)—the spectator' whereby not being able to look back, as in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, opens a new field of vision for the spectator. For full analysis see Strukov 2009.

notions of the subaltern and supernatural. As a matter of fact, the film begins with the narrator 'opening his eyes'; however, this is a narrative trickery since the 'eyes' of the camera were not closed and—as the viewer is about to experience—can never be closed, thus, the camera-spectator always occupies one world with no other alternatives provided.[33] In cinema, traditionally, camera perspectives veer greatly from objective to subjective representations, from an omniscient perspective to one which is strictly limited in its progression from sequence to sequence.[34] In films based on computer games, or in films that utilise the aesthetic principles of computer games, such transitions acquire extra value because they refer to the change in the gaming perspective and therefore of the gaming philosophy. Such a change provides a recipe for composing a completely different figurative world; it represents a different knowledge of the optics, light and physiology of vision; and finally, it asserts a new form of movement which is derived from interactive, haptic employment of vision.

The function is the gaze is primarily spatial in *Russian Ark* and *How I Ended This Summer*, and it is structured according to the principles of computer gaming. In the first instance, spatial continuity is contrapuntal as there is often no connection between one area and the next, and the whole universe is hinged on the assumption that characters move inside the Hermitage. In the second instance, the spatial continuity is overpresent when advancing far enough brings the characters back to the starting point and the whole environment is carefully mapped (this is achieved with the help of a shot that shows the map of the island, oral histories provided by Sergei, and finally aerial shots that help the viewer survey the area). Although the action takes place in vast open spaces of the Chukotka peninsula, the film makes a claustrophobic impression on the viewer: as in many games, the overtly mechanical world of *How I Ended This Summer* creates visceral resistance in the viewer. By contrast, the interiority of *Russian Ark* allows for the appreciation of its depth: constant gliding over surfaces and the unpredictability of the movements of the camera create lightness and draw the viewer into the imaginary world of the film.

How I Ended This Summer and *Russian Ark* end with a sense of loss. In the first instance, it is a matter of losing one's beloved family, a newly acquired friend, as well as innocence and sense of meaning. In the second, it is the loss of the cultural tradition, the destruction of Leningrad during World War II and the inevitable disappearance of the present moment. Such loss creates a feeling of inevitability and melancholy in the films. Daniel Punday argues that game-like narratives often 'adopt a melancholic structure of loss as a way to elicit an emotional response' (2004: 100). He contends that computer 'games do not merely interrupt a linear narrative, but define play as itself a matter of inevitable loss' (2004: 102).[35]

The computer game aesthetic informs not only the affective fabric of the films but also new types of visuality and representation, thus, uncovering the avant-garde concerns of *How I Ended This Summer* and *Russian Ark*. The films respond to the two most popular types of representation / camera positions available in computer gaming—the first-person shooter and the third-person shooter. While, as noted, these positions are related to traditional cinematic

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[33] This does not, naturally, preclude the world from being structured as a series of planes—or in this case, rooms—that serve as 'levels' in the camera's navigation through the gaming space of the Hermitage.

[34] One of the early examples of the use of continuous subjective camera is Robert Montgomery's 1946 *The Lady in the Lake*.

[35] On the connection between repetition and trauma in the age of digital reproduction, please see Murray 2000.

techniques, they are in fact very different from the camera-eye. The first-person shooter employs spatial constructs to signify transformation in subjectivity; and the virtual camera of the third-person shooter 'corresponds to no actual pair of eyes in the gameworld. The point of view from which we see Lara Croft is constantly moving, swooping, creeping up behind her and giddily soaring above, even diving below the putative floor level' (Poole 1991: 145-6).

Although the two films feed on the hybridization of media—film and computer gaming—and associated narrative styles, forms of presentation and identity construction, they do not purport hybridization of genres. In fact, *How I Ended This Summer* remains comfortably within the boundaries of psychological thriller. *Russian Ark* is a lot more difficult to define in terms of its genre affiliation—an experimental film would, perhaps, be the most obvious choice—it has not provoked any considerable discussion of its genre structure. This leads me to assume that hybridization of media is a phenomenon superior to that of the hybridization of genres. It would be wrong to assume that cross-media products would override existing genre systems; rather, they are most likely to produce new types of genres. Conversely, there is little evidence to suggest that cross-pollination of genres results in media convergence unless, of course, such hybridization takes place in already mixed environments such as the theatre.

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VLAD STRUKOV is an Associate Professor in Cultural Studies and World Cinemas, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Leeds. He is one of the founders of the Leeds Russian Centre (Russia[n] in the Global Context) and the Editor of a journal entitled *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. He is currently working on the project 'Visual Media in the Era of Multilingual Globalisation' with the BBC World Service and Leeds Institute of Communication Studies. His research on digital culture has appeared in a number of publications, including *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic* (with Professor Helena Goscilo, Routledge, 2010). His forth-coming publication is a book entitled *From Central to Digital: Television in Russia* (co-edited with Dr Vera Zvereva).