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Special Issue on Ken Russell

INTRODUCTION

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The position of Ken Russell (1927-2011) within British film studies remains an awkward one. Although he has been the subject of several major monographs, these were mainly published during the heyday of the director's career in the 1970s. As a result, there has been no systematic critical assessment of his complete work and its significance. This is despite the fact that Russell's work would seem to be highly relevant to many areas of scholarly research that are in the ascendant: the study of biography and biografiction, questions concerning the representation of the past on film, issues of adaptation, the relation between film and television, cult cinema, the representation of the body in cinema, the history and aesthetics of documentary and so on. It was in part to explore these aspects of Russell's work, but also to bring together scholars working on Russell, or who are working in areas to which his films are relevant, that the conference *Imagining the Past: Ken Russell, Biography, and the Art of Making History* was organised in Brussels on 19-20 March, 2014.¹ This event has, in turn, generated this special issue on the director's work and the majority of the contributions that follow were first presented at this conference.

In order to put the issue in context, it is worth beginning by reminding ourselves of the huge scope of Russell's oeuvre.² After several abortive careers (including as a ballet dancer and stage actor), Russell took up photography in the 1950s and also started making amateur films. One of these, *Amelia and the Angel* (1957), drew critical acclaim. On the strength of it he was offered work at the BBC, becoming a director of documentaries for the BBC arts programme *Monitor* in 1959.

For the next decade, Russell would direct more than thirty innovative films for the BBC. The 1960s were a period of profound social and cultural change in which broadcasting played a significant role. Russell's television films for the arts series *Monitor* (1958-65) and *Omnibus* (1967-2002) were, therefore, produced at a time of considerable experiment and innovation and were responsible for substantial changes in the concept of what arts documentaries could, or should, look like. By the end of the decade, however, and especially following the scandal over his film *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), which drew upon strategies of camp grotesquerie to portray Richard Strauss as a Nazi sympathiser, Russell and the BBC went their separate ways. By that time Russell had already established himself as a director of feature films with *Women in Love* (1969), an adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's novel. The new decade saw Russell at the helm of a series of highly innovative (and often commercially successful) feature films. The bulk of these were artist biographies: *The Music Lovers* (1970) on Tchaikovsky, *Savage Messiah* (1972) on the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Mahler* (1974), *Lisztomania* (1975), and *Valentino* (1976) about the actor Rudolph Valentino. His most notorious film of the decade, however, was *The Devils* (1971), based on Aldous Huxley's book *The Devils of Loudon* and John Whiting's play, while the rock opera *Tommy* (1975) proved to be a commercial high-point. By the end of the decade, and following the commercial (and, some have argued, artistic) disasters of *Lisztomania* and *Valentino*, Russell's career came to a temporary stand-still, subsequently broken by *Altered States* (1980) and *Crimes of Passion* (1984). Following the video rental success of *Gothic* (1986), the video distributor Vestron put up the money for three low-budget films: *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988), and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1988), a 'prequel' to *Women in Love*. None of these films were commercially successful and, after the box office failure of *Whore* (1991), Russell's career as a feature film director was over. New television work followed, mainly for Melvyn Bragg's arts programme *The South Bank Show*, but at the dawn of the new millennium Russell had effectively

become unbankable. He spent the last decade of his life making experimental video films in his home and garden.

Of what has been written on Russell, the best books are still the earliest. John Baxter's *An Appalling Talent* (1973) remains an invaluable source of information, especially because every other chapter is a first-person account by Russell himself, based on extensive interview material. This means that the book is in many ways a thinly-disguised autobiography. *The Adaptor as Creator* (1976) by Joseph Gomez was the first to attempt a systematic analysis of Russell's work. The author argued that Russell's films on artists were structured according to a 'tripartite perspective' (Gomez 1976: 51) that 'incorporates the protagonist's own romantic self-image, a more objective view revealed by the perspective of time, and finally Russell's personal vision of his subject' (Ibid.: 35). This model works quite well for a number of Russell's biopics, but not with others, and it is generally difficult to maintain a separation amongst the various categories. Next, Gene D. Phillips's *Ken Russell* (1979) and Ken Hanke's *Ken Russell's Films* (1984) provided helpful surveys, although the latter, while often insightful in its detailed analyses, suffers from an attempt to impose a developmental model on Russell's work that culminates in the last film that Russell happened to have completed before the book went to press. There followed a long gap until John C. Tibbetts's (2005) monograph on composer biopics, which devoted a complete chapter to Russell's work (including some of the rarely seen later television films); Joseph Lanza's *Phallic Frenzy* (2007), which remained largely journalistic in approach (and is especially sketchy on the later work); and Kevin Flanagan's edited volume *Ken Russell: Re-Viewing England's Last Mannerist* (2009a), which collects notable earlier contributions with new work. Even more recently, Paul Sutton's *Becoming Ken Russell* (2012) is the first part of a projected five-volume authorised biography. Although the last two volumes suggest a degree of re-emergence of interest in Russell's work, it also remains the case that there has been no attempt at a systematic and sustained analysis of Russell's films since Hanke's volume in 1984 and Russell's critical stock continues to remain relatively low.

There appear to be a number of reasons for this. First of all, there are a number of ruptures in Russell's work that make it difficult to assess as a whole. As previously indicated, there is a tremendous body of work for television concentrated in the 1960s but, as many of the articles in this volume indicate, it has not always been easy to see it. This has presented a problem not only for an assessment of Russell's work overall but even of his television work. Discussion of Russell's television films has tended to dwell disproportionately on films such as *Elgar* (1962) and *Song of Summer* (1968), his film on the composer Delius, in a way that has tended to skew the larger picture. This has also encouraged a tendency to pit Russell's television work against his cinematic features on the grounds that the 'good taste' and 'restraint' identified in his television films was replaced by the 'tastelessness' and 'indiscipline' of his later work for the cinema.³ Alexander Walker was a particularly prominent advocate of this position, writing in *Hollywood, England* that 'one had better try to enumerate [Russell's] considerable gifts when they are most in evidence in his early work; later on, they are harder to discern so confidently, as he lets his temperament ride roughshod over his talent' (Walker 1974 : 387).⁴ Given the tendency of film studies scholarship to ignore a director's work for television, or view it as no more than an 'apprenticeship', there is certainly merit in paying attention to the achievements of Russell's television work in its own right (and in relation to its own conditions of production and reception) . However, simply counterposing Russell's work for television to his work for the cinema remains problematic not only due to the selective basis upon which the comparison is conducted but also because of its denial of the complexity and variety that exists in Russell's work for *both* television and cinema.

However, it is also the case that this argument is less about a split between 'tasteful' television and 'excessive' cinema than a division in critical attitude. As has often been argued, there was, for a long time, a strong preference within British film criticism for works of realism and moral seriousness and, as Petley indicates in his article in this issue, *The Devils* (along with many other of Russell's films) suffered at

the hands of the critics for its supposed failure to conform to these critical standards. However, during this same period, there was also a growing challenge to this critical tradition by writers laying claim to the virtues of British films invested in fantasy and stylisation rather than realism and 'serious' subjects (Durgnat 1970, Pirie 1973, Petley 1986). This alternative tradition of 'non-realist' British filmmaking has subsequently been seen to include not only Gainsborough melodramas, the films of Powell and Pressburger and Hammer horror but also, more recently, the films of Nicolas Roeg, Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway and, indeed, Russell himself. However, although the battle for recognition of this tradition has been effectively won in the wake of an increasing stream of revisionist scholarship (Hill 2010), Russell still remains a relatively neglected figure. Amy Sargeant's (2003) critical history of British film, for example, which aims to re-evaluate neglected figures and films, has little space for Russell beyond *Tommy*, which is arguably his least neglected and certainly his best-known film.

One reason for this may be related to issues of gender. In their discussion of Russell (and Roeg) in the 1970s, Church Gibson and Hill identify three ways in which the 'excess' of these directors' films became manifest: as 'visual extravagance, excessive forms of behaviour, and a re-staging and reordering of traditional ideas about gender' (2008: 333). While there is little doubt that Russell's films involve visual extravagance and wildly histrionic performances, the films' portrayal of women and female sexuality has proved more problematic and has often been regarded as reinforcing traditional ideas about gender rather than subverting them. This issue is, of course, complicated by the very 'excess' of the forms through which gender and sexuality are represented and, therefore, how this is to be interpreted. Williams (2010: 50), for example, has suggested how Russell's collaborations with Glenda Jackson (*Women in Love*, *The Music Lovers*) rely upon an unsettling mix of 'gender uncertainty.... performativity' and 'intimations of sexual threat' while others have considered how films such as *Tommy* address contemporary discourses of masculinity (Claydon 2010; Smith 2010). In this respect, it might also be worth

considering how, from the nude wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates in *Women in Love* onwards, Russell has enjoyed a gay following and he is the only straight filmmaker featured as a major 'queer' director in Raymond Murray's encyclopaedia of gay and lesbian film and video, *Images in the Dark* (1996).

But if the 'excess' of Russell's cinema films, including their excessive portrayal of sexuality, has alarmed many critics, it should also be evident that just as Russell's work cannot be clearly divided between television and film so it cannot be straightforwardly understood as a form of filmmaking entirely at odds with realism either. As many of the essays in this volume indicate, it has been a significant feature of Russell's work that it has challenged many of the oppositions embedded in pre-existing practices – drama and documentary, professional and amateur, realism and expressionism, television and film, popular culture and high art. It is, therefore, not simply a matter of installing Russell within the anti-realist tradition of British cinema but rather of investigating the various ways in which his work has fused elements from different stylistic regimes (and with what consequences). The contributions to this issue cannot, of course, tackle the full range of questions to which his films give rise. However, it is hoped that it will not only contribute to our knowledge of Russell's work but also open up some new avenues of enquiry.

One of the most remarkable moments in Russell's career was its beginning, when he developed, in a matter of three years, into one of the most distinguished talents working at the BBC, where he first made waves with his films for the arts strand *Monitor*. Russell's more general contribution to the history of arts broadcasting has already been the subject of discussion (Walker 1993: 45-55; Wyver 2007: 10-46; Van Eecke 2013). In his contribution to our issue, therefore, John Wyver revisits one of the first longer films Russell made for the *Monitor* series. As a historical document, *Pop Goes the Easel* (1962) has been enthusiastically embraced by art historians because it offers an imaginative portrait of four young British Pop artists - Peter Phillips, Derek Boshier, Peter Blake, and Pauline Boty (who died tragically young of cancer in 1966) - made at a time for which visual records, and especially moving images, are

still often scant. Wyver not only places the film in the context and (at that point only recent) history of arts television, but he also takes a close look at the structure and formal innovations of the film, which not only records Pop Art but itself becomes a contribution to the form., Russell is, of course, celebrated for his innovative approach to television documentary in the 1960s and in productions such as *The Debussy Film* (1965), *Isadora Duncan* (1966) and *Dante's Inferno* (1968) on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, his 'documentaries' increasingly adopt the conventions of the fiction feature film. In his account of Russell's career at the BBC, Hill charts the increasing blurring of the boundaries between 'historical reconstruction' and 'subjective interpretation' evident in Russell's 'television biographies' and the growing institutional unease that this provoked. The scope and ambition that went into the making of these films is also evoked in Paul Sutton's interview with Roger Crittenden, who worked as editor on several of Russell's BBC films, most notably on *Song of Summer*. Crittenden also offers candid insights into what it was like sharing a film set with Russell and having to keep up with his sometimes highly unorthodox ways of working.

It was, however, *The Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), Russell's film on Richard Strauss, that led to Russell's eventual parting of ways with the BBC. As Hill argues, this film represented a culmination of Russell's experiments with the arts documentary and pushed to the very limit what the BBC felt able to broadcast. As such, it also sealed Russell's reputation as a provocateur with a capacity to provoke outrage and scandal. This, in turn, has created a myth that the BBC apparently failed to support the film and have been happy to keep it locked in the vaults ever since its initial broadcast. Although there was no question that many in the BBC disliked the film, the film was also, as Hill shows, defended by the BBC at the time. Nevertheless, the fact that it has proved so difficult to see has inevitably fuelled the semi-mythic status that it now possesses.

When he left the BBC, no doubt disgruntled by the Strauss debacle, Russell was fresh from the artistic and commercial success of *Women in Love*. However, from

then on his films came increasingly to attract controversy. This was particularly the case with *The Devils*, now widely regarded as one of Russell's finest achievements. Two contributions to our collection focus on *The Devils*, but from different perspectives. Julian Petley explores the problematic role played by the press in the film's censorship troubles. Drawing on contemporary press reports on the making and reception of the film, he indicates how newspapers contributed to the creation of a moral panic around the film, thus playing into the hands of conservative and religious pressure groups who wanted to expand the powers of censorship within Britain. Among the attacks on the film, identified by Petley, is one from professional Russell-nemesis Alexander Walker who complained that 'almost every serious question raised by the historical situation is thrown away by Russell'. In his analysis of the film, Christophe Van Eecke shows how this remark could hardly be further from the truth. By exploring the film's structure as an allegory about power and politics, Van Eecke shows that the film probes deeply into fundamental questions about human society. Furthermore, the formal conceits that Russell mobilises to achieve this allegory are all connected to the historical moment of the early seventeenth century, when the film is set: allegorical theatre, the *mise-en-abyme* (a self-reflexive play-within-the-play), and the burlesque in ballet and theatre.

While the early 1970s were the pinnacle of Russell's career, both in terms of success and in terms of notoriety, he did continue to make interesting work during the 1980s. Although these were difficult years for the British film industry, Russell managed to make four British feature films (albeit largely with American money) during this period: *Gothic*, *Salome's Last Dance*, *The Lair of the White Worm*, and *The Rainbow*. He also contributed a striking segment to *Aria* (1987), setting Puccini's 'Nessun Dorma' to mesmerising dream images, and directed two major American films: *Altered States* and *Crimes of Passion*. He also did some very imaginative work for Melvyn Bragg's *South Bank Show*, including an Emmy-winning *ABC of British Music* (again 1988: an extremely productive year for Russell) and his filmed autobiography, *A British Picture: Portrait of an Infant Terrible* (1989), starring most of

his family. Critical appreciation and assessment of this diverse body of work has been slow in coming, with scattered pieces here and there.⁵ In his contribution to our collection, Jack Post takes a rather unexpected approach to *Altered States* and focuses, not on the film itself, but on its opening titles. In his detailed analysis of the title sequence, Post argues that it is really an integral part of the film's fabric: through a variety of devices, the titles take us into the film's narrative universe, functioning as an imaginative threshold between reality and fiction, while also providing a 'matrix' of the narrative events and themes that are to follow. His discussion is a reminder of how a detailed close reading, attending to the minutiae of editing from cut to cut, can indicate the complexity of one of Russell's most highly-regarded films (even when it may not have been an especially personal project) .

Our final two contributions also take somewhat unexpected approaches to Russell's work. It is quite common, for example, to concentrate discussions of his biographical films on his many films on composers. Yet Russell also created a small number of intriguing films about visual artists. In their article, Steven Jacobs and Vito Adriaenssens take a look at three of these films - the BBC films *Always on Sunday* and *Dante's Inferno*, on Henri Rousseau and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, respectively, and the feature film *Savage Messiah* on Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and explore how Russell's representation of these artists draws upon, but also undermines, biopic conventions in the representation of artistic genius, particularly in the way in which they focus on the mundane or laborious activities involved in the process of artistic creation.

Similarly, Ken Russell is also unlikely to figure prominently in discussions of the representation of war on film. And yet Kevin Flanagan's contribution makes clear that the experience of war, and particularly the experience of the First and Second World War, is one of the many recurring threads running through Russell's work. Flanagan shows that Russell's approach to the experience of the First World War is significantly different from the way in which he represents the Second World War (which, as a teenager, he lived through). This not only involves a focus on the after-effects of war but also an engagement with, and pastiche of, the stylistic regime of the

enemy. Flanagan's is the only article in the collection that spans Russell's entire output, from the work for the BBC in the 1960s through his feature films in the 1970s and 1980s to the television films of the 1990s. By showing a consistency of theme and a relative consistency of approach, Flanagan implicitly makes a case for Russell as an *auteur*. This is not, of course, an unusual stance. However, while Russell may be commonly granted the consistency that is associated with being an *auteur*, he is often considered to be the wrong kind of *auteur*, the kind that makes inferior or meretricious work. However, while it is unnecessary to make a claim for each and every one of Russell's films, it is surely evident from this collection that Russell is a filmmaker whose work deserves and rewards serious attention. A proper assessment of his work will not only help to identify the scope of his accomplishments but also add to our understanding of the history of British cinema and television more generally.

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² Detailed biographical information of a more or less conventional kind (and in relation to Russell 'more or less' is really the closest to 'conventional' one can ever get) may be found in Baxter (1973) and Sutton (2012), as well as in Russell's (1989) autobiography. Much information can also be culled from Russell's two volumes of memoirs and criticism (Russell 1993 and 2000).

³ In an odd quirk, the brief entry on Russell in McFarlane's *Autobiography of British Cinema* (1997: 505-6), half of which is filled with Russell quotes, actually suggests that Russell became *less* iconoclastic after *Women in Love* (1969), although this is a point made partly in relation to adaptations of D. H. Lawrence novels.

⁴ Walker became well-known for his attacks on Russell's work and, following a negative review of *The Devils* in the *London Evening Standard*, Russell reportedly hit Walker over the head with a rolled-up copy of the newspaper during the BBC programme, *24 Hours* (Baxter 1973: 33).

⁵ Barry Keith Grant (2009 [1993]) has discussed body politics in Russell's 1980s films; Thomas Prash (2009) and Christophe Van Eecke (2012) have taken a serious look at *Salome's Last Dance*; and Linda Ruth Williams (2005: 400-4) has discussed *Crimes of Passion* in her survey of the erotic thriller (an admittedly odd genre context for Russell's unusual film).