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Imagining the Past: Ken Russell, Biography and the Art of Making History
Cinema RITS, Brussels, BE, 19–20 March 2014

A Report by Kevin M. Flanagan, University of Pittsburgh

Held alongside the Offscreen Film Festival (whose central theme, coincidentally enough, was British Cult Cinema), the Imagining the Past conference looked at visual discourses of history and biography, using the wild and varied career of filmmaker Ken Russell (1927–2011) as a primary test case. While the conference was only two full days, the Offscreen festival gave Russell's films a major two-week retrospective, including rare screenings of *The Devils* (in the longest available cut, incorporating the British "X" certificate version and the "Rape of Christ" footage unearthed and restored in 2002) and a theatrical showing of his two *Clouds of Glory* films, *William and Dorothy* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, hour-long exercises about the Lake Poets and their circle made for Granada Television in 1978. In fact, as the closing discussion of the conference made clear, one of the topics up for debate was the very focus of the conference itself. For Russell biographer Paul Sutton (Independent Scholar), it was a celebration of Russell's life and work, a chance to renew public knowledge about the man's films and the original intentions of their productions. For John Wyver (University of Westminster), it was a chance to refocus studies of Russell on specific historical moments, noting the institutional contexts that enabled (and occasionally prevented) his best works. As presentations by scholars like Maaike Meijer (Maastricht University: "Ken Russell as a Challenge to the Theory of Biography") and Sandra Kisters (Utrecht University: "Filming Artists' Lives—But How About the Art?") made clear, the conference was an occasion to look at biography as a larger, more dispersed practice, one whose general conceits and taken-for-granted tropes should be scrutinised. What was offered in the concluding remarks, moderated by principal conference organiser Christophe Van Eecke (Maastricht University), was that the conference had intended to be all of these things: a chance for experts on Russell, art historians, film historians, and filmmakers to get together and debate Russell's great creative legacy in light of wider discussions about the often critically marginalised status of biography within academic scholarship. In this instance, the filmmaker's unquiet reputation, his penchant for personalisation and stylistic excess, prompted as much awed reverence as disagreement.

After a welcome note by organisers Van Eecke, Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Université Libre de Bruxelles), and Muriel Andrin (Université Libre de Bruxelles), the conference began with a panel on the "Gentle Art of Biography" (the irony of the title was lost on no one). Paul Sutton gave a fascinating narrative of his nearly decade-long process of writing Ken Russell's biography, which has so far yielded a first book titled *Becoming Ken Russell: The Authorised Biography, Volume One* (2012). Although Russell once asked him to write his life as a novel,

Sutton eventually settled on an approach that attempts to balance primary sources, oral history, and the tact and wishes of the living participants whose on-record talk was often far more guarded than their casual banter would let on. Maaike Meijer's paper compared her approach to biography, and her writing of a life of the poet M. Vasalis, to Russell's treatment of his subjects. While Russell is often described as devouring his subjects (and Meijer's approach has more to do with being an "invisible servant" to her subject), she concluded that the two stances—one explicitly masculine, one explicitly feminine—actually have quite a bit in common in that they both explicitly and consciously position the biographer as an embodied interpreter of another person's life, a gatekeeper whose methodology enables new readerly connections. Sandra Kisters looked at Russell's films in relation to other artist biopics, including *Basquiat* (Julian Schnabel, 1996), *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (John Maybury, 1998), and *Pollock* (Ed Harris, 2000), comparing the ways in which they do (or do not) show the physical process of artistic production.

The afternoon session looked at Russell's early career with the BBC. Editor and educator Roger Crittenden (National Film and Television School), who cut Russell's *Delius: Song of Summer* as a young BBC employee in 1967, discussed Russell's approach to the physical nature of film. Crittenden offered many insightful personal stories, including one related to his taking over the editing of Russell's film on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, *Dante's Inferno* (1967), on which Crittenden had difficulty getting star Oliver Reed to take his post-synch recording duties seriously given that he was fresh off a long, liquid lunch. Overall, Crittenden's claims about the importance of physical activity and the actual joining of film resonate with Russell's movies, which often show an artist's material struggles as they strive to produce art. One of the happy accidents of the conference was the unintended connections that resulted from the sequencing of the talks: Kisters and Crittenden both stressed this kind of physical production without having collaborated beforehand. Sutton offered a quick tour of Russell's stylistic development, using representative clips from his early career to show the evolution of his recurrent obsessions. This session gave a useful, common point of reference for everyone, but it does somewhat contradict one of the general claims in Sutton's biography, which implies that the basic elements of Russell's film style were largely in place by 1959, the end of his first year with the BBC.

John Hill (Royal Holloway, University of London), John Wyver, and Matthew Melia (Kingston University) closed out the day with discussions of the larger cultural significance of Russell's work at the BBC. Hill's "Blurring the Boundaries Between 'Fact' and 'Fiction': Ken Russell, the BBC, and *Monitor*" looked at Russell's challenge to his institutional home in the BBC Talks Department, whose Griersonian approach to documentary was eroded by both Russell and Peter Watkins (and revised in the BBC Drama department, but from a different angle, by Ken Loach). Hill offered a carefully balanced reading of Russell's time with the organisation, where mentors like Huw Wheldon offered as much support and guidance as they did creative blockages. Hill ended with a discussion of the public debates over *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), Russell's film on the life of Richard Strauss. That film's editor, Dave King, had accompanied Crittendon to the conference, and Hill and King carried on further discussions about the making of and legacy of the film, comparing the extant files in the BFI's archives with King's memories and anecdotes about its production. John Wyver delivered a similarly positioned discussion of Russell's film *Pop Goes the Easel* (1962), a pop art film about four young artists (Peter Blake, Pauline Boty, Derek Boshier, and Peter Phillips) associated with the

Royal College of Art. This is the key film to combine Russell's interest in folk and pop art forms with discourses of high art and socially sanctioned aesthetic production. That the film is done in a manner entirely in line with the ethos of pop art (Wyver especially likes the opening, which shows the artists having fun at a carnival, but is justifiably bemused by the extended sequence of the artists doing "The Twist" at a loft party) shows Russell's deep understanding of artistic currents, even if they don't immediately gel with his own generational experiences. Matthew Melia ended the day's talks with a discussion of Russell's challenge to the Reithian ethos of public service broadcasting, noting some surprising similarities between Russell and darlings of the European avant garde like Samuel Beckett, whose television works had both baffled extant programming strands.

The second day began with two presentations on *The Devils*. Jamie Sexton (Northumbria University) surveyed the discourse around *The Devils*, noting that it was not marketed as a cult film from the outset, insofar as it was funded by Warner Brothers and enjoyed major, if localised and censored, distribution. Rather, it retrospectively "reads" as a cult film in terms of style and content, which position it closer to outsider cinema à la Alejandro Jodorowsky or John Waters. Sexton noted the scathing reviews by the British critical establishment and its difficulties with local councils and regional censorship boards. However, these challenges, protests, hurdles and derailments all feed into the cult story of *The Devils*, still unavailable on home video in a complete and ideal form. Christophe Van Eecke followed with a theoretical reframing of *The Devils* as an extended theatrical metaphor, a truly baroque text of embedded narratives, micro-level simulations, and self-reflexive metanarration. This ties directly in to Van Eecke's nearly complete dissertation, which looks at Ken Russell as a major baroque artist whose autobiographical tendencies connect him to a tradition stretching at least as far back as Molière. Before the end of the session, Paul Sutton showed some images of a recently rediscovered scene from *The Devils* (that was never restored and probably never will be), featuring a lost cameo with Spike Milligan, the full details of which are in his book *Six English Filmmakers*.

Jack Post's (Maastricht University) "Altered Titles: Typography in Ken Russell's Title Sequence for *Altered States* (1980)" looked at how these titles, designed by Robert and Richard Greenberg, showcase a creative tension of text and image that curiously tie into later thematic conflicts in the film. More generally, his paper suggested that such sequences, which are often created by industrial firms and are not totally within the hands of a director, form an often-ignored component of film study, one stranded between extradiegetic add-on and crucial part of a given film world. My (Kevin M. Flanagan, University of Pittsburgh) work, "Ken Russell's Wartime Imagery", situates Russell's scattered attention to war and war representation in a continuum with other directors active in the 1960s and 1970s (a diverse group of European filmmakers, from Richard Lester to Lina Wertmüller) who represent war in occluded, indirect, or allegorically traumatic ways. As John Wyver pointed out to me, it is perhaps dangerous to discuss the long culmination of Russell's career in too similar terms, but I decided that in the spirit of a career-retrospective festival, I would survey work from the early 1960s, up-to-and-including the late 1990s. Particularly moving are Russell's films about artists in exile, including two TV productions about escape from the continental Europe of the Second World War, *Bartok* (1964) and *The Mystery of Dr. Martinu* (1993), wherein Béla Bartók and Bohuslav Martinů attempt (in vain) to compose while living at a forced remove from their respective homelands (Hungary and Czechoslovakia). Pascal Vandelanoitte (University of Leuven) offered an

incredibly detailed musicological reading of the funeral sequence from *Mahler* (1974), nothing Russell's selection of specific movements from different Gustav Mahler compositions in order to accentuate his visual themes.

The last presentation of the conference was from Lisi Russell, Ken Russell's widow, who offered a personal view of what life and collaboration were like with Ken. The two were married for the last ten years of his life, during which time he directed amateur films, lectured, and starred on reality television (*Big Brother*). Her insights were a great complement to many of the more academic discussions, since she reminded that Russell's thoughts and behaviour were not entirely what made it up to the screen. Despite the bombast of some of his films, he was essentially a shy man, given by turns to humility and occasional prankish mischief. Lisi brought Russell's last completed film, *Boudica Bites Back* (2009) for a screening, a collaboration between her (she portrays Boudica), director Ken Russell, editor Michael Bradsell, and the students at Swansea Metropolitan University. The film—a telling of the Boudica myth via a green screen "cine-opera" presented mostly through song—contains some astonishing images, great work by the students, and remains Russell's only fully digital film as a director.

While the participants and audience members of the conference no doubt maintain their differing views on the importance of Russell's work to the larger worlds of biography and cinematic history, it is safe to say, from the post-film discussions and the socialising over meals and drinks, that Van Eecke's stated goal—to get scholars who work on Russell "into the same room"—was essentially productive. What remains to be seen is whether or not Russell's larger creative fortunes, both in mainstream film culture and the academy, will change. Since I published *Ken Russell: Re-Viewing England's Last Mannerist* (2009) and since Russell's death in 2011, I would venture that they have. The scholarship of the "Imagining the Past" conference will do even more to return his life and work to these ongoing debates.

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