

THE BIGGEST FILM BIOGRAPHER IN THE WORLD: THE FILMS OF KEN RUSSELL FOR THE BBC

I am amazed with matter.

William Shakespeare *Cymbeline*
(IV.iii,28)

The new DVD release in late 2008 of five of the ten film biographies that Ken Russell made for the BBC in the 1960's is a cause for celebration as that series constitutes one of the major bodies of cinematic work in the 20th Century. The series began in 1959 with a documentary of the little known British composer Gordon Jacob and ended in 1970 with a film on Richard Strauss. The films currently available in pristine prints from BBC Warner were made between 1962 and 1968 first for *Monitor* and then for *Omnibus*, two series that broadcast documentary films of a didactic, instructional and patriotic nature. The one-hour programs shot on 35mm black and white film that Russell made were to be conventionally instructional documentaries but dynamic – that is “modern” biographies of major European artists and composers, concentrating on British lives but not limited to them. There was to be a voice over narration that was explicitly an authorial voice, as was typical of documentaries then and now, and there was to be use of extensive archival material made available through the BBC. The idea was to draw a larger and younger audience to the already established tradition of documentary films by making them more challenging and exciting.

Elgar (1962) is a biography of the early 20th Century British composer best known now for his melancholic cello concerto and *The Enigma Variations*. According to the composer the latter was meant to be a kind of aural portrait of his friends and family. *The Enigma Variations* would in more ways than one be a kind of guiding light for Russell's work from that moment on through the whole series of works for the BBC as it remains a masterwork of aural ambiguity and uncertain narrative clues. As the title implies the identities – such as they are – remain unresolved and open ended. They are a kind of line on which to hang various ideas about people and their musical spirit without ever resolving the issue of explicit meaning or correspondence between sounds and identities. Russell's previous work consisted of various cultural films made for the *Monitor* television series ranging in subject from documentaries of Scottish painters to the life of Kurt Weil. His more personal short films such as *Amelia and the Angel* (1957) showed a brilliant and precocious talent idiosyncratically able to channel the “past” in prosaic images such as landscapes, abbeys, parks, alleys, and hum-drum middle class interiors rendering them alive with possibility. What are those biographical films about and what are they doing aside from fulfilling their didactic purpose, and why are we still watching them half a century later?

The films have a voice over narration but treat their biographical lives obliquely rather than directly. We see inference rather than anecdote. *Song of Summer* (1968) concerns the relationship of the British composer Frederick Delius to the master's apprentice the young Eric Fenby who provides the voice over narration. The paintings and drawings of Edward Munch populate the film and act as a

sounding board to that relationship in a way that is never made explicit. Munch's winter aesthetic seems to permeate the summer landscape of Fenby's memoirs in a way that he himself would not have been conscious of until much later. In *Isadora the Biggest Dancer in the World* (1966) the American dancer Isadora Duncan passes through various landscapes and urban views that correspond to the voice over narration but the staged scenes are shot in a documentary style and the documentary shots have highly theatrical music cues to highlight their presence. The various stylistic devices are self-consciously deployed and often one device is made to play off another as in musical counterpoint. For example the romantic romp on the beach in *The Debussy Film* (1965) mimics a similar one in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) but the counter shot – of the director looking cynically on the scene with bemusement – throws into doubt the authorial intention of the romantic shot. In short the films rely on paradox and ambiguity to construct a narrative that is as multi-layered and complex as their subjects.

The most spectacular of the films *The Debussy Film* begins with a film crew arriving on location with a hearse and a fire engine to produce the appropriately dramatic fake rain for a funeral procession. This film within a film is to be a biography of Debussy. Who's funeral is it? The film moves from the fake funeral in the rain to the director feeding a line to a child playing Debussy's son: "It seems he was a composer". Even the director seems unsure. Debussy is played with intelligence and bravado by Oliver Reed an actor who would go on to various collaborations with Russell, and he asks astute questions to his director about Debussy often defending him against accusations of unfeeling carelessness with regard to his

female companions. Just who is right in this argument remains an open question. The camera pans from the director and actor in full discussion to an outdoor luncheon in the grass in which the women in Debussy's life set out to picnic in the summer of 1897. The transition in which past and present are made to cohabit the same space works brilliantly to establish the emotional connections between actors and the people they are portraying and the scene collapses the two time periods as we see the short space (literally and figuratively) between 1897 and 1965. Russell does not draw attention to his poetics, as does Bergman who in *Wild Strawberries* (1957) has a camera pan perform a similar function. On the contrary the movement is quick and moves on rapidly to other business - nevertheless the poetics are no less effective.

This is made very clear in a brilliant scene that takes place at a contemporary party. Reed/Debussy and the director step into an apartment with the latest hit music on the turntable: *You Really Got Me* by the Kinks. The actors dance the twist and Reed in a contrary mood takes the Kinks record out and puts on one of Debussy's most quiet and meditative works. The actress Annette Robertson playing Debussy's mistress challenges Reed's move by beginning to use the music to do an impromptu strip-tease. She directly challenges not only the actor - and by inference Debussy - but the very idea of serious music and what it might be used for. The juxtaposition of the Kinks with Debussy inevitably leads to the question of just what constitutes contemporary music. Are the Kinks Debussy's heirs? Russell posits the question but does not answer it. The relationship of the actors beautifully mimics the relationship of Debussy to Gaby Dupont the woman that Annette Robertson is

playing. The two identities fuse at that moment in way that is both emotionally and aesthetically coherent. Only Godard in *Le Mepris* (1963) is able to match Russell by using Fritz Lang and Brigitte Bardot as twin poles in a film within a film that is being pulled in various directions by warring factions that can never resolve the contradictions of film as art and film as business. *Le Mepris* itself of course is the answer to that particular contradiction.

The Debussy Film's approach is Brechtian in more ways than one. It brings to the forefront the actors as "actors" and it interrupts the narrative with unforeseen elements of burlesque such as having Reed/Debussy in a match with an "actor" (described in the credits as "the actor"!) in which they shoot each other with a modern plastic toy that fires rubber darts. Their absurd play – in a 19th century house that Debussy lived in after his success - is telling about the childishness of actors on a set generally but more importantly we begin to understand Debussy's subsequent failure to produce work after that initial success. His inability to reconcile that childish selfishness which drove him on in his hungry years with his adult emotional life leaves him in limbo. He spends his time playing games like a boy but can never finish "The Fall of the House of Usher" the Poe story to which he devoted the last twelve years of his life. The opera, after the fall of Europe and World War I surely seemed like small potatoes. There was no energy present. His radical vocabulary of sounds had already been co-opted and enlarged upon by Stravinsky, Bartok and others who revolutionized serious music. Debussy is caught between a century that he helped bring to an end and a new one that he seemed not fully able to comprehend. His retreat into boyhood games shows us in stark terms

that are both comical and tragic the end of the line. The funeral at the beginning was of course Debussy's own.

Always on Sunday - a biography of the painter Henri Rousseau - is perhaps the most moving of the BBC films. The title refers both to the popular film *Never on Sunday* (Jules Dassin, 1960) and to Rousseau's status as a Sunday painter before retiring from his full time job as a clerk in the tax collector's office at age 49 to pursue his beloved hobby full time. His desire to reach everyday people emotionally with his work is analogous to Russell's film and to the series of films as a whole. The uncomprehending audience of pompous twits during an opening of Rousseau's work is shown - in a burlesque manner - by depicting them as they would have been seen by Alfred Jarry, Rousseau's one friend who understood his genius and was able to write intelligently about it. The voice over commentary hilariously describes Jarry as a pataphysical midget! A description that would no doubt have caused the sensitive Jarry to fire the loaded pistol he carried with him on his bicycling tours of Paris. Their moving friendship is visually developed in a few quick scenes that touch upon Jarry's brilliant play *Ubu Roi*. Russell juxtaposes the bloated bosses on stage with those in the audience to full effect. When the ladies in the front row faint upon hearing the first word in the play: "shit", Rousseau and Jarry can only take delight in their small victory. We sense the precariousness of their lives again by inference. For example the care with which Rousseau handles a pot of stew that is to last him for a week and that he ends up spilling on the shoes of some visiting dignitaries from the art world who look with incomprehension at Rousseau's work - and at his life. Similarly in *Isadora the Biggest Dancer in the World* Isadora Duncan is shown

dealing with in-comprehending administrators in America, Europe and the Soviet Union, all equally oblivious to the creative impulse in her and in themselves, regardless of their political leanings. They manage to wear out her body but not her spirit. Russell's politics are fundamentally humanist but without the cloying aggrandizement of "Humanity" that debilitates so much humanist rhetoric. Russell prizes small moments as well as dramatically sumptuous ones. He loves creative people because of their unwavering emotional commitment to their work. When artists speak truth to power he is with them every step of the way and when they make a mess of their lives he fleshes out their emotional realities and puts them in a historical context without being superior. His are the least didactic biographical films ever made which is ironic considering their origins on the BBC.

When Hollywood films tackle biographies then and now they are first and foremost concepts illustrated with images. A good example is *Immortal Beloved* (1995) a biography of Beethoven made by Bernard Rose in which Beethoven's work is made out to be about his frustrated love for a woman he can never hope to have and every scene in the film tediously reiterates the same absurd proposition. No attempt is made to try to understand who this very complex man was or why he wrote the music he did to say nothing of his relationship with other composers and musicians or the cultural realities present in Germany at the time. Biography is reduced to melodrama and the music is made to seem anecdotal and trite.

In Russell's work there are a multiplicity of narrative threads each with its own specific character. These narratives whether theatrical or realistic are there to

serve the purpose of understanding the full emotional and intellectual components that make up a life to the extent that they can be understood. These multiple realities co-exist not as random bits of scattered ideas but are orchestrated into a coherent artistic vision that not only narrates a life but expresses a point of view about biographies generally that had until that point not been articulated in the cinema. When Virginia Woolf narrated the life of Mrs. Dalloway or James Joyce wrote about the maturing of Stephen Daedalus they took full advantage of the collage and montage aesthetic derived from film then sweeping the arts. In that sense these early 20th century writers were more cinematic than filmmakers of the time that in their work tended to mimic either the adventure serials of comic strips or the linear narratives of 19th century novels. Most feature films today use the same narrative strategies (as we have seen with the film about Beethoven) but with incidental details and special effects that make them “contemporary”. The collision of various narrative strands in Woolf and Joyce – their uses of multiple voices in narrating their works – are musically engaged in a kind of counterpoint that makes relative the authorial narrative voice itself. Such a strategy was not new - it had been seen before with Cervantes, Laurence Sterne and others. What was new was that these multiple narratives are made to articulate a particularly urban sensibility that is both comic and tragic simultaneously while remaining fully engaged with the oncoming rush of disparate impressions common to an urban sensibility. These are principally city lives even if like Delius or Elgar they retire to the country from sheer exhaustion.

What Russell did with narrative is to fuse the theatrical, the burlesque, the drama and the documentary into a dense and intensely felt cinematic tour-de-force. This intensity of feeling often mimics that of the biographical subject who is often a young romantic. For example the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Rossetti in *Dante's Inferno* (1967) is seen in the full fever of creative engagement. The camera movement and the heroic music share in Rossetti's enthusiasm, youth and promise. In that sense Russell is able to have his cake and eat it – that is he is able to share in the romantic excess of his characters by mimicking their explosive creative temperaments but unlike them is able to pull back and see that romanticism in the context of other counter narratives that put that romanticism in perspective. A case in point is to be found in *Dante's Inferno* as we see Dante Rossetti's first view of Jane Morris his mistress to be and the subject of many of the Pre-Raphaelite's best work. Her idealized image would preoccupy much of Rossetti's work for the rest of his life. This momentous encounter is depicted with energetic cuts and musical starts and stops fully engaged with the romanticism of the moment as in the beginning of *Jules and Jim* (Truffaut 1962). This is followed by a slow static scene in which the artist and his friends carefully make a painting using Jane Morris who is frozen in a conventionally heroic neo-classical pose; at which point she suddenly starts to chew gum and lets go of a Yo-Yo with her "heroically" poised hand completely ridiculing the gesture and the sentiment. (Interestingly in Russell's work it is always women who throw a monkey wrench into the pretentious endeavors of egotistical men.) Such a scene spectacularly throws into doubt the Pre-Raphaelite ideology of pre-Renaissance classical order and ideal beauty that they so earnestly believed in and

sought to create in their work. It suggests strongly that such endeavors are fantasies that have little or nothing to do with the everyday world as it is. Again Russell gives voice to two contradictory sentiments or voices within the same work to ecstatic effect for we can never be sure where the film will go next.

The shifts between these various voices can only be described as musical or polyphonic that calls to mind the various “voices” in modernist poetry such as *The Wasteland* by Eliot and the voices of modernist music – most obviously in the work of Stravinsky who mimicked various past works into a collage – his detractors would say a pastiche - of disparate and fragmented sound bites. Such an aesthetic was meant to express the varieties of urban experiences and scientific ideas regarding randomness and relativity that were then new. In Russell’s work the highly theatrical tableaux that express concepts visually and the highly realistic scenes that express the singular evanescence of particular moments work not in opposition, but on the contrary to show that there is no real opposition between the two: the tableaux supposes the realism and vice versa and the dialectic between them is expressed dramatically and visually with immense emotional impact.

Ken Russell would move into feature films in 1967 with the slight *Billion Dollar Brain* and then two years later direct the more substantial *Women in Love* (1969). The television work did not entirely end there as he returned for the same *Omnibus* series to make a biography of the German composer Richard Strauss. The resulting work *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970) is one of the most controversial films of his career. The film openly ridiculed Strauss’ Nazi leanings in a burlesque manner

typical of Russell's work, yet the homoerotic elements and the satire of Nazi ideology was too much for the established institutions of the time. Music from the Strauss family was always popular amongst Parliamentarians! A motion was passed on the floor of Parliament to condemn the film; the BBC after first supporting it finally pulled the film. Russell's work for the BBC was done – at least for eight years. He returned in 1978 to make *Clouds of Glory: William and Dorothy*, a biography of the relationship between the English poet William Wordsworth and his sister. He has continued to produce film biographies for the BBC including an exceptional film on the life of Anton Bruckner in 1990.

His subsequent work in films and television would be often uninspired and mannered but sometimes brilliant. He would occasionally use the same extremely talented people that he had with him for the television work such as Melvyn Bragg who wrote many of the BBC films and would write the biography of Tchaikovsky: *The Music Lovers* (1970) and his wife Shirley Russell who was costume designer for *Dante's Inferno* and *Song of Summer* and would go on to work on the biography of the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska: *Savage Messiah* (1972) among others. Russell's later biographic work would often degenerate into bombastic caricature and self-conscious kitsch as in *Litzomania* or *Salome's Last Dance* but the work done for the BBC in the sixties is another matter. The films were challenging and brilliantly inventive, completely transforming the way we think of documentaries. Russell's work looks more modern, more engaging, more alive, and more intelligent than anything not only in contemporary broadcasting media but in contemporary cinema. Those films are teeming with a sense of immediacy and vitality and, in spite

of the didacticism inherent in the initial project as it was conceived by the BBC,
there is much that we can still learn from them.

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