“Understatement never won a war”: British filmmaker Ken Russell (1927-2011)

Paul Bond
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It speaks volumes about establishment attitudes towards artistic exploration that the film director Ken Russell, who died last month aged 84, was for many years treated in the British press as little more than an eccentric joke. This accompanied harsh treatment by the censors and studio heads: forty years after its release, one of Russell’s greatest films, *The Devils* (1971), is still commercially unavailable in the form it was made.

To his credit, Russell remained defiant in the face of this. He always maintained an independence of vision. His best work is informed by a choreographic visual imagination like the music that inspired much of it. Unlike his near peers Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, Russell was elaborating a deliberately poetic visual aesthetic of psychological states.

There was more to his work than the purely visceral, but marginalised from the big studios, the fiercely independent Russell demonstrated a willingness to play up to the image of a gifted prankster outside the mainstream. Although he remained determinedly serious and even steely about his work, he also willingly conformed to the critic Derek Malcolm’s description of him as “a talented boy who never quite grew up.”

Much of the excess, for which he was vilified at the height of his powers, was a savage exposé of moral hypocrisy. There is only a fine line, however, for the gifted and marginalised artist, between this and a more lurid tendency to shock for its own sake. Over the years there was something of a decline in the general quality of Russell’s work.

The once prolific filmmaker latterly complained about lack of employment, but he remained busy, having enthusiastically embraced digital technologies and the possibilities they offered for making films domestically. His response to difficulties was to become ever more independent, shooting films at home. He gleefully announced he had become a “garagiste”, as that was where most of his films were now made.

His entire artistic life had followed an idiosyncratic path in pursuit of his vision. He fell in love with the cinema early on. Russell was born in 1927, the eldest son of a Southampton shoe shop owner. His parents’ marriage was not happy, and his mother suffered from mental problems.

He went to several local schools. At one, older boys wore the uniforms of Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists under the guidance of the headmaster. At the beginning of the war his cousin Marion was killed when she stepped on a mine placed in the local beach against enemy invasion.

Cinema offered a refuge from the stifling life of the provincial petty bourgeoisie, as well as the threat of fascism and war. His early childhood was spent accompanying his mother to the cinema daily. His earliest film memory was seeing Feodor Chaliapin in Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s *Adventures of Don Quixote* (1933). The film, he said, “made a great impression on me—it was awful. Threadbare, corny, undramatic and boring.”

Russell’s comments indicate how deeply he was learning from these early cinematic experiences. Shortly afterwards he acquired a 9.5mm hand-cranked projector, and began screening cartoons and Chaplin films at home. Later he bought a silent 35mm projector and a trunk-load of films from a cousin. He wrote of his admiration for the beautiful tinting of the many otherwise boring travel films he had acquired.

The future director went back to 9.5mm projection during the war because more films were available locally, including many works of German Expressionism. He said the works of Fritz Lang and Leni Riefenstahl “really opened my eyes and fired my imagination.”

Given that Russell was already aware of the rise of fascism, and would later make one of his most pointedly scabrous films about Richard Strauss’s adaptation to Nazism, his admiration for the visual aspects of Riefenstahl’s films is striking and perhaps even disturbing. It was a response to something in German Expressionism, including its self-indulgence.

Russell also refused to see national limits to artistic influence. During the war he and a friend staged screenings for the Spitfire Fund (fundraising for munitions construction) at which they screened films like Lang’s *Siegfried* (1924). He said recently that he hoped “the audience, like me, learned to see that art had no frontiers.”

After boarding school he spent some months in the Merchant Navy, where he suffered a breakdown. Back at home he heard the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto for the first time on the radio. This began an abiding love of Romantic music generally, and Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s in particular. He attributed his recovery from the collapse to music.

This also took a physical form. He would apparently play Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* and dance around the house in an enthusiastic and untrained fashion. This period marks the emergence of his artistic vision.

Russell joined the Air Force, and used the time to pursue music more assiduously. He became fascinated by classical ballet. A regular concertgoer, he saw Ralph Vaughan Williams and Strauss conducting their own work.

On demobilisation he began learning ballet, although he started too late to dance effectively. He drifted into the chorus line of a musical theatre company that went bankrupt three weeks later. There were short, unsuccessful spells as an actor and in regional ballet before he turned to still photography.

Here Russell began to explore his latent visual sense. Some of his sequences of stills were constructed cinematically as what he called a “dream world”. Movies were a logical next step, and four amateur films were eventually accepted as his application to the BBC.

During this period Russell converted to Catholicism, although he later rejected most of its teachings. He said that, having been “vague and sentimental” beforehand, he gained “a basic core of irony” from Catholicism. (He directed this against the Church itself, describing Lourdes as “a pretty grotty place, a sideshow of terror”.) The newfound harshness and an accompanying quest for truthfulness, coloured by a

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somewhat baroque sensibility, were important advances in his film-making, although he seems to have been developing them anyway. The religious turn did not aid any longer-term clarity.

Huw Wheldon took him on at the BBC programme *Monitor*, which John Schlesinger had just left. Wheldon's role in nurturing filmmaking talent at this time cannot be emphasised enough. *Monitor*, Russell later insisted, "was and still remains the one and only English experimental film school ever, and Huw Wheldon was its guiding genius."

After his first non-fiction film, about the poet John Betjeman, Russell began to expand the scope of his work. He worked on documentaries throughout the 1960s, specialising in artists and musicians.

His approach was developing, too, towards more poetic forms of interpretation of factual events. He used an actor for the first time in his 50-minute film about the composer Edward Elgar, much to Wheldon's dismay.

Russell learned how to work with actors in commercial films such as the entertaining *The Billion Dollar Brain* (1965). He disliked the acting technique of saying a line and then offering a slight change of expression. This, he wrote, is how people behave in real life, but "looks unreal" on the screen. Instead he pushed for a more stylised synchronisation of line and reaction to create something immediate, mysterious and unexpected.

The Billion Dollar Brain opened the most remarkable period of his work, which coincided with the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s. His television documentaries reached their peak of achievement. Films about Isadora Duncan and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were widely acclaimed, while *Song of Summer* (1968), about the British composer Frederick Delius, remains one of his most enduring and sensitive works. The following year *Women in Love* offered a lushly romantic vision of D.H. Lawrence's novel, with excellent performances from Oliver Reed, Alan Bates and Glenda Jackson particularly.

Jackson also excelled in *The Music Lovers* (1970), a watchable, if exuberant portrayal of Tchaikovsky's life. Parts of it are overdone, but its lushness was a deliberate attempt to explore the disjuncture between Tchaikovsky's dream life and reality. Russell was interested in the sublimation of personal problems into art. He recognised the tendency in himself, but noted that it also resulted in immense damage to those around the artist.

Women in Love gave Russell an early experience with the censors. The nude wrestling scene between Reed and Bates caused them concerns. In parts of Latin America the whole scene was cut. The jump from the men locking the door to lying naked on the floor panting led to it becoming known as The Great Buggering Scene. "So much", said Russell, "for the subtleties of censorship."

The last of his great BBC films, *The Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), was equally controversial. It was directly political, attacking the composer Richard Strauss for his accommodation to Hitler's Third Reich. Some of Russell's crudity and one-sidedness can be seen here. Strauss was undoubtedly an unappealing personality, who adapted to fascism for opportunist reasons. Russell was simply dismissive: Strauss "was *a Fascist composer*. Everything he did … was a glorification of the Master Race, just as bombastic and just as sham and hollow" [Russell's emphasis].

This is highly reductive. It led Russell to seek visual representations for those elements of Strauss's music he thought "highly coloured, schmaltzy and crude". Russell attributed the violence of his imagery to the violence he found in the music.

Russell's anger seems partly attributable to his experience of fascism, but partly also reflective of his feelings about the responsibilities of an artist. Someone "in the communication business", he wrote, has "a duty to his fellows, and Strauss sold everyone down the river to gratify his egomania, his bank balance and his career". That is certainly directed at Strauss's opportunism, but it fails to grapple with the composer's music, much of which is magnificent. Life and art are more complicated than Russell's limited conceptions would suggest.

Russell noted that when the film came out "all the critics who'd been knocking [Strauss] for years started knocking me instead". The BBC then made a programme defending Strauss. Russell's reaction to it suggests that the BBC programme was as unfairly loyal as he had been hostile.

This furore was as nothing to that surrounding *The Devils* (1971). This extravagant and sumptuous film (Derek Jarman designed the sets) concerned the accusations of witchcraft and possession in the town of Loudun against the backdrop of court intrigues. A dissolute priest, Grandier (Oliver Reed, in a magnificent and revelatory performance, easily his finest), attempts to defend Loudun against the political machinations and is ruined as a result. Sister Jeanne (Vanessa Redgrave), the nun whose sexual obsession with Grandier triggers the witchcraft accusation that brings the convent down, is broken in the process.

This remarkable piece of work attracted an immediate backlash from those accusing it of blasphemy. To achieve an adult rating in Britain, Russell agreed to cut some nudity. Studio heads then made further cuts before submission to the censor. In the US the cuts were more extensive. Much of this material was simply discarded. There have recently been efforts to locate and restore the missing footage. Fuller prints have been shown once or twice, but there is no indication that they will see wider release either in cinemas or on DVD.

This is an injustice. The film is frenzied, but that is part of its point. It is also powerful and moving. Some of Russell's later films, like the unsatisfactory *Valentino* (1977), *Tommy* (1975) or *Lair of the White Worm* (1988), seem more overblown to less successful effect.

The furore over *The Devils* did not destroy Russell's career, although it may have subsequently served to limit the opportunities available to him. Beginning with *Altered States* (1980), he made some films in Hollywood, but he found the studio environment there exemplified the compromise he was set against. He returned to television direction, and to films about composers. The later work is variable in quality, although Russell retained his ebullience and enthusiasm throughout.

For all its extreme unevenness and excesses, Russell's work represents an attempt to find a visual form of poetic insight into psychological conditions. In itself that points to some of the limitations in his work, but the attempt at cinematic poetry remained always interesting. At its best, his work reaches an extraordinary and powerful pitch.

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