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## Ken Russell's Unrealised Projects and Unmade Films, 1956-1968: The BBC Years

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### 1) Introduction

The career of the provocative sometimes controversial British auteur Ken Russell is littered with a bewildering amount of unrealised projects dating from his early career making pioneering arts bio-documentaries from the BBC's arts showcase *Monitor* to the final decade of his life (Russell died in 2011) making home-made films on digital video with friends and family in the garden and garage of his New Forest cottage (his 'garagiste' period). These 'Shadow projects' provide a vantage point from which to view the arc of Russell's career – from his transition from experimental, amateur film maker to having an innovative central role in the BBC's post war arts programme, through his career as the most iconoclastic (and most divisive) figure in British arts cinema from the 1970s, to the return to his amateur film making roots from the late 1990s.. The aim of this discussion is to illuminate how these unmade 'Shadow' projects that never saw the light of day (or at least, in some cases, not in the way Russell originally intended) fit into the wider narrative of Russell's career. This is something that has not been discussed or told in detail before – certainly there has been no study given over solely to this aspect of Russell's career before. Certain key writings on the director make reference to some of these abandoned projects, but they are, more often than not, presented as incidental or anecdotal asides to the existing canonical body of work – among these studies, Joseph Gomez's *Ken Russell: The Adaptor as Creator* (1976)<sup>1</sup>, is one that comes the closest to recognising the critical importance of some of these unmade films.

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<sup>1</sup> Gomez, J. *Ken Russell: The Adaptor as Creator*, TBS The Book Service, LTD: London 1976

In particular Gomez offers some valuable insight into later unmade early 1970s scripts such as *The Angels*, or Russell's aborted carnivalesque adaptation of the story of 'Gargantua and Pantagruel' by Rabelais, *Gargantua*.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter hopes to demonstrate how an examination of Russell's abandoned projects aids us in gaining a fuller understanding of the existing work and offers a more complete understanding of his career. It also hopes to show how these projects form a sort of parallel cinema in the shadow of the main body of work. The chapter, however, will focus on the period 1956 to 1968, from Russell's emergence as an amateur film maker through his career at the BBC to his position as a key auteur of British post war arts cinema with his first major film *Women In Love* (1968). It aims to be the jumping off point for a wider, later, more comprehensive study of Russell's career viewed not through the prism of the official body of work, but through the projects which were planned or considered but which were ultimately thwarted or abandoned. In doing so it hopes to recognise the value of such works in sustaining, supporting and developing the extant films, Russell's career and his identity as a filmmaker.

In existing critical discussions of the unmade films, those which date from his time at the BBC have had comparatively less critical coverage than others. The chapter will address a range of projects excavated from BBC written archives and consider the reasons why they failed - What were the factors that contributed to their failure (industrial? Personal)? And

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<sup>2</sup> Jarman was a figure who is important to understanding Russell's aesthetic choices during the early 1970s and famously designed the sets for both *The Devils* (1971) and *Savage Messiah* (1972). Also, according to Jarman's biographer Tony Peake, Ken had poached Jarman away from starting work on Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975): "Earlier in the year, while still working on *Savage Messiah* Russell had asked Jarman if he would like to design *The Angels*, a fantasy satire on modern times Russell was scripting for MGM. Because of its fantastical nature, the script offered Jarman much more scope than *Savage Messiah* and he indicated his interest. MGM, however pulled out, and the project floundered. This might have angered Jarman greatly (in the interim he had been approached by Stanley Kubrick, whom he felt obliged to tell he was not available) but Russell was able to save the day with a completely new project offering equally dazzling design possibilities: a film version of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* being developed for Warner Brothers by Alberto Grimaldi, the Italian producer of Pasolini's *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*" (Peake, Tony *Derek Jarman*, Abacus Books, London, 1999, pps 186-7).

what can we learn from them about Russell's emergence and transition from amateur to a professional film maker working within the parameters of television broadcasting?

## 2) Ken Russell: Shadow Cinema

How do we define the term 'Shadow Cinema'? Could it be a body of amateur films made prior to the emergence of the director as a fully fledged auteur? Could it be a body of unrealised work which lies in the shadow of a canonical, 'official' body of fully realised and completed work? Does it denote films which have been made, and since lost to posterity - Russell's *Monitor* film, *Cranks At Work* (BBC, 1960) for instance? This was a BBC documentary/ 'fly on the wall'<sup>3</sup> film following a day in the life of South African dancer and choreographer of the Sadler's Wells Ballet<sup>4</sup> John Cranko and his preparations for the *New Cranks Revue Show*<sup>5</sup>. Is 'Shadow cinema' defined through projects which were begun and then left unfinished at the development stage? Dan North observes,

There are numerous criteria by which a film might be deemed to be 'Unfinished'. It might simply be a case of a screenplay that was never filmed, a shoot that was shut down prior to completion, even an idea for a story that was mooted and discarded at the back-of-an-envelope stage.[...].<sup>6</sup>

North's study, collects a variety of critical insights into the unfinished projects of several of Russell's contemporaries – directors such as Lindsay Anderson, Derek Jarman, and Joseph Losey but Russell himself is a surprising absence from this roster – especially given the amount of projects he undertook or proposed. North's criteria can, nevertheless, be applied to a study

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Russell was experimenting with the format, nearly 50 years ahead of the reality television/fly on the wall craze of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to his early experimentations with film Russell had trained to be a ballet dancer, an obsession with dance and movement runs through his films.

<sup>5</sup> Which, it is broadly assumed, fell victim to the great cull of tapes carried out by the BBC, along with hundreds of hours of programming from the period. The BBC threw out or recorded over tapes in order to save both money and space. Until 1978 the broadcaster had no firm policy on the archiving of live broadcasts and recorded material.

<sup>6</sup> North, Dan (ed.) *Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Cinema*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2008, p.1

of Russell's unmade, incomplete or abandoned projects – a collection which takes on a range of different forms: projects planned in tandem with the BBC or production companies; unrealised scripts and treatments for projects he had vocalised to collaborators or loved ones, for instance, and which never came to fruition; ideas for stories that were 'mooted and discarded at the back-of-an-envelope stage' (the BBC Written archive contains numerous examples of these); or projects for which no documentation exists but which are remembered by collaborators and colleagues. In the course of the research for this discussion, an interview with actor Murray Melvin (who worked with Russell, regularly across his career: from 1964's silent comedy inspired *Diary of a Nobody: Domestic Jottings of a City Clerk* (BBC)<sup>7</sup> to *Prisoner of Honor* (1991)<sup>8</sup>) revealed two proposed biopics from the mid 1970s - one of the French composer Hector Berlioz and one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British erotic artist Aubrey Beardsley.<sup>9</sup> However, as North suggests, "The British film industry can be notoriously brittle, and its productions prone to abandonment, neglect or pre-productive implosion"<sup>10</sup> and these projects, failed to see the light of day thanks to the collapse of the British film industry in the latter half of the 1970s<sup>11</sup>. The Berlioz project is particularly worth noting as Russell appears to have considered a similar project in 1965, 10 years earlier<sup>12</sup>, while working for *Monitor*. In a letter archived at the BBC Written archives Russell professes a desire to make a film about the life of the composer, but admits that BBC budgetary constraints would not "stretch to a film

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<sup>7</sup> Based on the George Grosssmith's 1892 comic novel

<sup>8</sup> Russell's telling of the Dreyfus affair starring Richard Dreyfuss and Oliver Reed (his last collaboration with Russell)

<sup>9</sup> whose work has a stylistic influence over Russell's cinema and is incorporated into the production design and mise-en-scene of films like *The Boyfriend* (1971), *Lair of the White Worm* (1987) and *Salome's Last Dance* 1988

<sup>10</sup> North, Dan (ed.) *Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Cinema*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2008, p.1

<sup>11</sup> A further interview with Ken's wife Elise Russell also revealed a host of projects Russell had planned in the final two decades of his life which indicated a desire to break back into mainstream film making and which a lack of funding proved to be an insurmountable obstacle

<sup>12</sup> According to Murray Melvin, his brief cameo as Berlioz in *Lisztomania* (1975) was intended as an audition for the role of the composer in the proposed film.

with a cast of thousands”<sup>13</sup>. Here we may note that Russell, who at the time had one relatively minor cinematic release under his belt, the seaside comedy *French Dressing* (1964), is already looking to expand the scope and ambition of his biographical film projects. In another letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1965 Russell writes to comedian Spike Milligan (who he would later cast in a scene ultimately cut from *The Devils* [1971]) that

If ever I do the Van Gogh story [...] I would love to do it with you, Next year is a long way off but colour TV will be almost with us by then and we would be able to shoot it on colour stock”.<sup>14</sup>

It seems from these two letters that the technical and financial limitations of the broadcaster, at the time could neither support the vast amount of musicians required to perform Berlioz compositions on film (particularly the *Symphonie Fantastique* which Murray Melvin suggests would have featured prominently in the later film) or render sufficiently the vibrancy and colour needed for a biopic of Van Gogh. It’s also evidence that while Russell’s films for the BBC were intrinsically cinematic (see below) by 1965 his natural inclination for the spectacular, present even at this early stage, was limited by the constraints imposed upon his canvas by Television and the broadcaster. With the mooted *Berlioz* project, we may also note an example of Russell returning again to an idea formed out of the crucible of his formative experience at the BBC, and aiming to render it on a cinematic canvas. This would not be the last time, as we shall see.

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<sup>13</sup> BBC Written Archives, T32/1095/1

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

### 3) Ken Russell, The 'Despised Amateur': Unrealised BBC Projects 1958-1968

Prior to his appointment at the BBC in 1959 to make *A Poet In London*, his first professional film for *Monitor*, Ken Russell had already made four experimental shorts: *Peep Show* (1956) (a 'Chaplin-esque comedy' with a 'pianolo accompaniment'<sup>15</sup>); the incomplete *Knights on Bikes* (1956); *Amelia and the Angel* (1957) (a 'a Cocteau-esque fantasy'<sup>16</sup> which had 'just won the 'Film of the Year Award' in the *Amateur Movie Maker Magazine*'<sup>17</sup>); and *Lourdes* (1958) ('my most ambitious effort' with a 'a score by Benjamin Britten borrowed from his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, and it was in colour'<sup>18</sup>). These films, as Brian Hoyle observes, are the foundation for Russell's attachment to the amateur – a style to which he would consciously return to at the end of his career. And as Hoyle remarks that "Russell's fascination with and sympathy for amateurs, especially in the arts"<sup>19</sup> is an enduring trait of his work and a characteristic of each of his films: "Almost every film he has made involves an amateur performance of one kind or another".<sup>20</sup> Furthermore Hoyle observes in his essay ' "Start as you mean to go on": Ken Russell's Early Amateur Films' the foundational importance of Russell's early and formative amateur "shadow" years:-

While many film makers attempt to distance themselves from these early experiments, Russell clearly remains proud of the 'small-gauge' origins. On numerous occasions he has noted that he launched his directing career with a film he made for 400 pounds and the help of a few friends. The film in

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<sup>15</sup> Russell, K *A British Picture*, Southbank Publishing, London 2008, p.15

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Hoye, B, "In Defence of the Amateur" in *Ken Russell: Re-Viewing England's Last Mannerist* (Flanagan, K. ed.) Scarecrow Press, Plymouth 2009 pp.40-41

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

question, *Amelia and the Angel* (1958) essentially earned him his job at the BBC's flagship arts programme *Monitor*.<sup>21</sup>

These films are also the foundations of the developing Russell style (experimental, florid, musical, romantic, phantasmagorical, whimsical and catholic!) and while it was *Amelia* which drew him to the attention of Sir Huw Wheldon at the BBC, it drew him first to the attention of another key industry figure: Sir Michael Balcon, head of Ealing Studios - and one of the most revered and influential figures in 1940s and 1950s British Cinema: Russell had been singled out for selection by the BFI (under Balcon as chairman) for its newly launched Experimental Film Fund<sup>22</sup> which catered to amongst other things, telecinema, arts documentaries, and later Free Cinema. Michael Brooke observes:

The British Film Institute first dipped a cautious toe in the murky waters of film finance with the creation of its Experimental Film Fund in 1952. Although this went on to back early work by Ken Russell, Ridley Scott and Peter Watkins, the sums involved were tiny, with the entire operation run from two grants totalling £22,500 plus the proceeds of film sales (which amounted to just £7,018 by 1960). As a result, the Fund was typically only able to put a few hundred pounds into individual films, and there was little question of it backing feature-length efforts.<sup>23</sup>

In a 1958 letter Balcon mis-identifies Russell as a cine-photographer as opposed to a still photographer and photographic documentarian who had recently moved from photography into film making. In a responding and revealing missive Russell writes in August 1958 asking Balcon for help and guidance. In it he writes,

One of your statements is, however (unfortunately for me) not entirely correct. You list a number of films and then follow it with 'all made,

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<sup>21</sup> Hoyle, Brian ' "Start as you mean to go on": Ken Russell's Early Amateur Films' in Shand, Ryan and Craven, Ian (eds.) *Small Gauge Story Telling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* EUP, NY, 2013, p.201

<sup>22</sup> The fund had replaced the Crown Film Unit which had been dismantled in 1951. The Eady Levy scheme had proposed two grants (£12,500 each) for the creation of experimental films by emerging young film makers to make films for telecinema. Balcon had been chosen to chair the committee. Other early nominees had included John Schlesinger, Alan Clarke, Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson.

<sup>23</sup> Brooke, M 'The BFI Production Board: The Features' *BFI Screenonline*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1348538/index.html>, 2014, last accessed 08/09/2018



incidentally, by professionals or by young men and women who have since become professionals [...] My film *Amelia and The Angel* is among those you mention but I, alas, am still a despised amateur. I want to make films professionally and I should like to find a place in the film industry but without contacts this seems to me at times to be an almost hopeless ambition.<sup>24</sup>

This self-identification as a “despised amateur” is at odds with the outspoken public persona ascribed later, in the 1970s, to the “Enfant terrible” and “Wild man of British Cinema” (titles foisted on him by the British media post-*Dance of the Seven Veils* [BBC, 1970] and which dogged him and his reputation thereafter) and demonstrates a degree of self-awareness and trepidation as he looked towards the British film establishment for guidance and recognition. The letter is indicative of a film maker who struggling to emerge and to find their place and Russell’s films are, tellingly, also full of characters (see *Altered States* [1980] or *Tommy*, [1975]) who emerge transfigured and transcendent, or reborn from traumatic, cocooned, contained and limiting states of being.

BBC films like *The Debussy Film* (1965); *Delius: Song of Summer* (1968) and later films such as *The Music Lovers* (1970) or *Mahler* (1974) also all deal with the complex relationship and power dynamics between artists and their patrons and mentors<sup>25</sup>; artists who struggle for acceptance by the establishment whilst at the same time being seemingly locked in conflict with it. In his autobiography *A British Picture*, Russell discusses both *Amelia and the Angel* and his need for BBC patronage – which would turn out to be a profitable if often conflicted relationship:

It had just won the ‘Film of the Year Award’ in the *Amateur Movie Maker Magazine*. So far my audience had been limited to family and friends, some amateur film clubs and a convent of nuns. It was time to turn professional and for that I needed financial support and a showcase. In a word I needed *Monitor*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Archive, BFI Reuben Library, *Sir Michael Balcon Collection*, ‘Correspondence re: Ken Russell Tries to become a professional filmmaker’ Ref: MEB-1650

<sup>25</sup> In the case of *Delius: Song of Summer*, the relationship between the composer and his amanuensis Eric Fenby.

<sup>26</sup> Russell, K *A British Picture*, Southbank Publishing, London 2008, p.15

13 years later in a letter to the Daily Telegraph decrying the £40,000 supplementary grant that had just then been awarded to the BFI for their Film Production Board, Russell reflected unfavourably on his early experience. Referring to the BFI film production board as a “A production board which would last 5 minutes in the real world outside their fairy castle in Dean St”<sup>27</sup> Russell critiques the Board, observing their habit of flaunting and exploiting the names of directors (including his own) whose careers they claimed to have launched and condemning them for flushing money down the “dilettante drain”. He writes:

I can't speak for my colleagues but as for launching me - that's just a bad joke. True, in my early days I did ask them for help and always had the door slammed in my face. Eventually I made a modest little film called *Amelia and the Angel*. The word got about that it was good: the BFI saw it at the dubbing stage, lent me £100 at enormous interest to finish it off and have been wallowing in glory ever since.....<sup>28</sup>

These early years help frame Russell's career, conferring a symmetry upon it. If, during these years, the young Ken Russell is desperately trying to emerge from the shadows, then it was to the shadows he retreated in his final decade with a deliberate return to amateur film making (we might say they are the shadow of his early amateur years) partly in response to his year of being neglected by an increasingly indifferent and often affronted British Film Industry. This 'Garagiste' period includes films like *Fall of the Louse Of Usher* (2002); *Boudica Bites Back* (2009); *A Kitten For Hitler* (2007)<sup>29</sup> – all home-made in the grounds of his Hampshire cottage, on a digital camcorder, with a miniscule budget and 'with the help of a few friends'. In interview with James Payne, Russell stated of his later 'Garagiste work':

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<sup>27</sup> Daily Telegraph, 12/7/1972, BFI archive

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> A short film made for a wager with Melvyn Bragg who proposed Russell couldn't make a film that even he (Russell) would be offended by

All you have to do is press a red button. And there's nobody telling you what to do, it's also nice to have control over what I'm doing now, like I had in my early films such as *Amelia and the Angel*. It's free and easy and anything that comes into one's mind is achievable. There's a way to achieve without resorting to money.<sup>30</sup>

These films are notable for their deliberately amateur aesthetic, form and style but they nevertheless remain consciously Russellian in terms of content and iconography. These final years provide a context for understanding for his work as a form of 'shadow cinema' operating outside of (or in the shadow of) dominant, contemporary trends in cinema.

#### 4) Unmade Films

##### *The Wheels of Chance (1960)*

This early struggle to emerge, transfigured, from the shadows is evident from another letter. Two years prior to the major breakthrough, of *Elgar* (1962), Russell had proposed and written a treatment for an adaptation of H.G Wells's short novel *The Wheels of Chance* (1895). Correspondence around this project dates back to June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1959 with a letter from Norman Swallow (Assistant Head of Films and Television) to Miss D Ross (Copyright department) . In the correspondence he refers Russell to Ross as someone "whom you may know as someone who is doing a series of film treatments for us"<sup>31</sup> and who is "is interested in the possibility of adapting "The Wheels of Chance" by H.G. Wells as a 30 minute television programme"<sup>32</sup>. After querying the copywrite clearance on the project he suggest that "if the proposed adaptation were to be accepted it might be technically advisable for it to be made entirely on film"<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Payne, J "A Ban Apart", *Garage Land: Arts, Culture, Ideas*, Issue 6: Supernatural [https://www.transitiongallery.co.uk/htmlpages/editions/g\\_land6\\_russell.htm](https://www.transitiongallery.co.uk/htmlpages/editions/g_land6_russell.htm) (last viewed 28/11/2019)

<sup>31</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK. *Elgar* file, T48/508/1

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

Wells's novel is a whimsical satire set during the "Cycling Craze" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Russell's hands it may also have potentially been the middle section in a trilogy of films<sup>34</sup> sandwiched between both *Knights on Bikes* and *Elgar*<sup>35</sup> where the bicycle also has a strong iconographic and thematic presence (as it also does in, *French Dressing*)<sup>36</sup>. The letter indicates, that *The Wheels of Chance* was, in fact, envisaged as both film and TV programme<sup>37</sup>. Two further letters indicate that copyright was cleared and that it was agreed with Russell that he would prepare a treatment (for a total of 30 guineas), and that on condition of a full script being produced another 60 for a 45-minute play or 90 for an hour. However, a final decisive letter dated September 1960 from Donald Wilson (then Head of Scripts at the BBC) brings the matter to a crashing close, pointing out the shortcomings of Russell's treatment and further revealing Russell's struggle to emerge from the shadow of the amateur:

Although I can see this working in a general technical sense, I am not nearly so happy about it from the point of view of dramatization. It seems to me superficially done. [...] the whole thing is underscripted for this amount of story. The introduction of numbered "shots" has rarely any relevance to what would eventually appear on the screen because it cannot possibly include all the necessary angles you would want to use [...] my feeling about your scripting is that it is unrealistic and gives little idea of shape and construction. I think that this is important, but possibly of less importance than a feeling of general disappointment of your story so far in terms of dramatic construction, and I am sorry but I cannot accept this as a satisfactory piece of writing.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> As I will further note, the unmade films, when set against the existing ones evidence thematic groups or cycles of films.

<sup>35</sup> In the archive file T32/1033/1 at the BBC Written Archives there is evidence of Russell's use of amateur musicians in the role of an amateur wind band: "They are amateurs and took the part of an amateur band at Powick Hospital where Elgar used to conduct and teach."

<sup>36</sup> Here the bicycle plays a significant, iconographic role in the film's opening sequence: an homage to early silent film comedy and cinema.

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Russell seems to have also looked to the BBC for his unmade film *The Angels* (1973) – a response from Christopher Morahan at the BBC reads: "As I said the other day I understand that Ken Russell was to get in touch with us when he returned from his work in Italy (and H.D.G thinks he has already told Ken Russell's agent this) that a) I don't like it very much. It's quite entertaining but very bewildering and b) it really is far too expensive for us" (BBC, Written Archives, Caversham, UK, T62/5/1

<sup>38</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK. *Elgar* file, T48/508/1

If *Wheels of Chance* indicates an early (if unsuccessful) attempt at experimenting with narrative film making and adaptation it also slightly alters the accepted narrative of Russell's career demonstrating that prior to Russell's biographical explorations (which would become his trade-mark mode of filmmaking across his career) he was already attempting to write for the BBC within the framework of fiction/ adaptation. He would return to this narrative style two years later with his first foray into cinema, *French Dressing*<sup>39</sup> as well as with *Diary of a Nobody: Domestic Jottings of a City Clerk* (BBC, 1964). Russell is perceived, at this point in 1959, to be overly ambitious, not yet deemed proficient in scripted for televised drama, unable to adapt a cinematographers mind-set (one which was suited to experimental documentaries of *Monitor*- up to this point Russell had been making innovative, experimental documentary shorts for the broadcaster such as *A House in Bayswater*, [1959] to one needed for the more (spatially) limited medium of long-form narrative television drama.

#### *The Quest for Corvo* (1966/1967)

Another unmade project dating from 1966, *The Quest for Corvo*, was a proposed adaptation of A.J.A Symons experimental, post-modern 1934 biography of the eccentric English writer Baron Corvo (real name Frederick Rolfe) entitled *The Quest for Corvo – An Experiment in Biography*. Correspondence around the project dates from 1967, when he was involved with post production on *Dante's Inferno* for the BBC – the dramatized documentary on the pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and *Corvo* was a film that Russell seems keen to have made in a similar style. At the time Russell was working as a freelance film maker-working for the BBC, as well as completing production of his second cinematic feature the spy thriller *Billion Dollar Brain*, released in December 1967. A letter from April 1967 (one month before production on *Billion Dollar Brain* was completed) from Sally Jenkins (BBC

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<sup>39</sup> as much an homage to his European contemporaries in the emerging French *Nouvelle Vague* as to the current trend in British Seaside films

Music and Art Department) to Heather Dean of the BBC Copyright department indicates that Russell was keen to come back to the BBC to make the film and “does not want to let the matter drop”<sup>40</sup> and that he was keen to fix up a meeting with Julian Symons (the author’s brother and holder of the book’s copyright) to discuss the matter. The New York Review of books describes Symons book as a

hilarious and heartbreaking portrait of the strange Frederick Rolfe, self-appointed Baron Corvo, an artist, writer, and frustrated aspirant to the priesthood with a bottomless talent for self-destruction. But this singular work, subtitled “an experiment in biography,” is also a remarkable self-portrait, a study of the obsession and sympathy that inspires the biographer’s art.<sup>41</sup>

Symons writes himself into the book as he uncovers more about the mysterious Corvo after coming into possession of a copy of the 1904 novel *Hadrian the Seventh* (which charts its lead character’s troubled journey to the papacy). As a book which deals and experiments with the ‘biographers art’ and contains a novel-within-a-novel dealing prominently with Catholicism (and the machinations of the Church), this would seem an ideal choice of subject for Russell. During this period, Russell was increasingly concerned not just with biographical film making but with biographers themselves (another abandoned project on the Bloomsbury writer, biographer and author of *The Eminent Victorians* (1918) Lytton Strachey is detailed below) Russell self-consciously places himself with a tradition of biographical representation and experimentation. However, *The Quest for Corvo* seems to have fallen through after meeting between Russell and Symons failed to take place. A further letter from Heather Dean suggests that Russell had failed to follow up with correspondence around the project (possibly due to

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<sup>40</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1967, T53/99/2

<sup>41</sup> Byatt, A S ‘The Quest for Corvo’ *The New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nyrb.com/products/the-quest-for-corvo>, 2001, Last viewed 10/9/2018

being involved production on *Isadora* [1966]) and that Symons had turned down the £100 fee after an arranged meeting did not take place. The letter from Dean reads reads

It is possible that one day Ken Russell may come back to the idea of making a television film documentary about Baron Corvo. Meanwhile I am filing your letter of July 6<sup>th</sup> last year with a note that Julian Symons had not accepted the fee of £100 for the television use of the book *The Quest for Corvo*...His acceptance was conditional upon a meeting with Ken Russell that never came about after he telephoned twice and wrote to him once. I believe that Ken Russell is now involved in film making.<sup>42</sup>

By 1967, Russell had made over 30 films for *Monitor* of varying types and styles combining both dramatic and documentary conventions<sup>43</sup> and by then he was already planning a film adaptation of a DH Lawrence novel which, in a letter from 1968, he calls “Lawrence in Torrents”<sup>44</sup> – this would turn out to be *Women In Love*. *The Quest for Corvo* emerges (and then disappears) at the time when Russell is moving between the mediums of film and television. This correspondence suggests that Russell simply lost interest in the project and was increasingly drawn to other projects, possibly *Delius: Song of Summer* (which archived correspondence demonstrates to be considered by both Russell and the BBC, the highwater mark of their work together) and latterly *Women In Love* (1969).<sup>45</sup> Although the phrasing of

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<sup>42</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1967, T53/99/2

<sup>43</sup> John Hill’s essay ‘Blurring the lines between fact and fiction’: Ken Russell, the BBC and ‘Television Biography’ (*Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Volume 12, Issue 4 October 2015, Edinburgh University Press) gives a detailed account and analysis of this practice and how “Russell’s incorporation of elements of drama into the arts documentary generated arguments, both within the BBC and beyond, about the legitimacy of mixing ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ in such works. These debates focused, in particular, on the use of ‘dramatic reconstruction’ and subjective ‘interpretation’ and the ‘fairness’ of the films’ treatment of the artists and composers with which they dealt.”

<sup>44</sup>BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK. Letter to Huw Wheldon, 18/9/1968, T53/118/4

<sup>45</sup> This was one of two major Lawrence adaptations Russell planned, the other was the unrealised *St Mawr* (1972), which Russell scholar Kevin Fullerton describes as being about its central character’s obsession with

The powerful stallion St Mawr, seeing it as symbolic of nature, a forgotten past, sexual liberation and the epitome of idealised manhood. St Mawr is owned by a group of upper class toffs, but always remains tethered to a mysterious groundskeeper, a brooding Welshman (and therefore an outsider) who also overtly symbolises a lost past....he reasons for its failure to be financed are largely unknown, although its sexually explicit nature and overtones of bestiality may have been too controversial for backers.

Dean's letter lends itself to the understanding that Russell was increasingly washing his hands of television. This was, of course, not to be the case.

It also seems, however, that in 1973 (according to a letter from BBC Head of Plays, Christopher Morahan of April that year) *The Quest for Corvo* was again mooted as a possible Russell project the following year when the English-speaking rights became available. In an article in *The Times* in 1970 regarding the controversy surrounding Russell's film for the BBC's *Omnibus*, *Dance of the Seven Veils* (his 'Comic Strip in 7 Episodes on the Life of Richard Strauss'):

Mr Russell has a "big list" of subjects for future television films, headed by Gustav Mahler – "It would be a portrait of Vienna in 1910 with Freud in his prime, a weird and rather marvellous era"<sup>46</sup> – and Baron Corvo, originator of Hadrian Seventh"<sup>47</sup>

As with Berlioz, Corvo connects Russell's BBC 'era' with the ambitious cinematic biographical projects of the 1970s – although what form it would have taken is a mystery.

*The Great Twentieth Century Music Revue* (1967)

Russell would, across his career, frequently return to projects, recycling them in different forms. He would, for instance be invited<sup>48</sup> to revisit *Elgar* again in 2002 for ITV's flagship arts programme *The Southbank Show* and its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations with the film *Elgar: Fantasy of a Composer on a Bicycle*<sup>49</sup>. This was not the first time however, he returned to the composer in 1976 with an unrealised film script, *Elgar, Land of Hope and Glory*, a sequel of

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(Fullerton, K 'Sex Against the State: Sexuality as an Iconoclastic Act in the Films and Novels of Ken Russell' Paper given at the conference *Ken Russell: Perspectives, Reception and Legacy*, Kingston University, 14/07/2017)

<sup>46</sup> This is also revealing: Russell's portrait of *Mahler* (1974) was originally envisioned as a BBC film 4 years earlier as a film dealing with the composer as part of the wider milieu of artists and intellectuals at the turn of the century.

<sup>47</sup> Billington, Michael, 'Film Director Wanted to Shock', *The Times*, February 17 1970

<sup>48</sup> By his friend and collaborator, the broadcaster and presenter of *The South Bank Show*, Melvyn Bragg.

<sup>49</sup> In the 1970s, Russell also returned to *Elgar* for an untitled and unrealised project – this will be the subject of a later study on Russell's *Elgar* films



sorts to the *Monitor* film. Beginning in 1936 after Elgar's death, it uses a Wellsian flashback technique as we follow a mechanic called Burt and a mysterious 'Woman' through the locations of Elgar's life. The concept of the composer and the 'mysterious woman' would later be revisited in his abandoned 1982 *The Beethoven Secret*.

Between the 1980s and the 2000s Russell returned to making TV films this time for ITV and the *The South Bank Show*. One of the films that Russell made during this period, *Ken Russell's ABC Of British Music* (ITV, 1988) is anticipated by an unmade BBC documentary film entitled *The Great Twentieth Century Music Revue*, for the BBC's arts showcase *Omnibus*. A letter from August 1967 from Stephen Hearst (Head of Arts features) to the controller of BBC 1, locates the potential production among a flurry of projects mooted around the time of (and in the wake of) the production and broadcasting of *Delius: Song of Summer*.

Ken Russell, like Jonathan Miller, likes changing his programme offers between breakfast and tea so, subject to him having changed his mind again since we were together, I would like to briefly outline his proposal.

When we met he thought he was likely to shoot his next film on Nijinski in March and he would therefore find it impossible to do a major film on Delius for us before then. What he could and very much wanted to do was a relatively (for Ken) inexpensive film called "The Great Twentieth Century Music Revue" which would rely on compilation and take a light hearted and sweeping look at the changing fashion of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Music. This would be about a fortnight's original shooting and the style of the film would to some extent be based on the Prokofiev which went out in *Monitor* and combined original shooting with library footage.<sup>50</sup>

This letter illustrates that that by the 1960s the BBC had become a breeding ground for a new generation of highly talented creative minds (like Russell's and Miller's) but ones which were less willing to cede creative or artistic control to the controlling and patriarchal BBC – also that Russell later returned to the project in 1988 for ITV offers another example of Russell

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<sup>50</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK, 17/8/67, T62/5/1

recycling older abandoned projects (of which we will see further examples) – for Russell these projects were rarely fully lost and retained a level of importance for him.

### Nijinski

Both *Nijinski* and *Strachey* are two further, examples of major projects which were later abandoned. *Nijinski*, was to be a biographical film dealing with the complex relationship male ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinski and the founder of the Ballet Russes, Sergei Diaghilev. Lee Langley again brings us back to the fact that Russell's projects were becoming less easily containable by the medium of television:-

Russell says he could never have done it properly on television: "Part of that epoch was the spectacle, the extravagance and I just couldn't have shown it. We'd have had to find ways to suggest the spectacle, instead of using it to make a comment" ...The central key to *Nijinski* will be the ballet "Petrouchka" because episodes in the ballet closely mirror the dancers life and the violent relationship between Nijinski and Diaghilev.<sup>51</sup>

It was to have been a major project in 1968 and correspondences surrounding it span from December 1967 to March 1968 when the project is declared dead (or 'postponed indefinitely').

A letter from Russell to head of programming John Culshaw from January 1968 reads

Just to a note to reassure you about my honourable intentions towards *Delius*. The position is this, maybe *Nijinsky* will be made this year, maybe it will be made next year, that is if it is not made as a feature film. I would like to make it for the BBC as a Television film, but that's another story.<sup>52</sup>

From earlier letters to head of programming John Culshaw it is evident that *Nijinski* was to have been the next major project but was postponed and replaced by *Delius* which was original slated to go into production afterward. Russell had, in fact, been already contracted by Saltzman to direct *Nijinski* with Nureyev in the lead according to Russell the film fell through after the

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<sup>51</sup> Langley, L "The Eisenstein File", *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1967

<sup>52</sup> BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK, undated but 1967, T53/118/3

dancer walked off the project leading to its abandonment, leading him to make *Billion Dollar Brain* for 007 producer Harry Saltzman.<sup>53</sup> However in another example of an abandoned idea being later recycled, Russell would later go on to make a biopic of the film star Rudolph Valentino (1977) with Nureyev. A key issue also seems to have been when to start *Delius* which appears to have been Russell's priority and by 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1968 *Nijinski* appears to be off the table permanently.

When researching unrealised projects, a degree of speculation and hypothesis is also required and here we might *also* consider that had the film gone into production, how would it have affected the production of the '77 film? Would Nureyev have agreed to it and would Russell? (this seems doubtful given the disintegrating relationship between the two men during the production of *Valentino* – a film which Ken later disowned). Or is *Valentino* another example of Russell, recycling and rethinking (and incorporating elements of) a project long since abandoned? If *Nijinski* had gone into production might it have formed part of a hypothetical cycle of films based around male dancers (which Russell had trained as in a previous life) and which would have begun with *Cranks at Work* and ended with *Valentino* (1977).

### *Strachey*

There has, to date, been little to no discussion of Russell's unrealised adaptation of the life of the writer and Bloomsbury group member Lytton Strachey, based on Michael Holroyd's biography. Correspondences around *Strachey*, show a production that Russell was seemingly keen to make for the BBC's *Omnibus*. The correspondences<sup>54</sup> date from 4<sup>th</sup> July 1968, during which time he was busy filming *Women in Love*. A letter from Norman Swallow (Executive producer for *Omnibus*) to Holroyd declaring Russell's interest in the project and from which it is clear that both Russell and Holroyd had liaised about a possible collaboration. Two further

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, G "An Interview With Ken Russell", *Film Comment* Vol 6: 3, 1970

<sup>54</sup> British Library Western Manuscripts Collection, Add MS 82004

letters ensure asking Holroyd for a film treatment (one letter from the set of *Women in Love*). The idea ran into trouble when the writer Frances Partridge, a surviving member of the Bloomsbury Group and wife of Ralph Partridge (the unrequited object of Lytton Strachey's affections) and Noel Carrington the son of the painter Dora Carrington (Strachey's lover) voiced concerns over the dramatized form and content of the film after reading a brief article in the Sunday Telegraph (17<sup>th</sup> December 1968).<sup>55</sup> These members of Strachey's circle had also been made wary by a recent sensationalist serialisation of Strachey's story which had been printed in the Observer newspaper. Norman Swallow wrote in a letter to Partridge from 29<sup>th</sup> November 1968 saying

I was extremely sorry to hear from Michael Holroyd of your proposal worries and out proposed documentary film about Lytton Strachey. But let me say at once that I sincerely sympathise with your response to a newspaper item – which I assure you did not come from us, nor even, I think, mentions the BBC. We are forever learning about ourselves from news papers, usually inaccurately<sup>56</sup>.

Swallow goes on to state their intention to make two 'complimentary' films – one about Virginia Woolf (to be made by Julian Jebb) using 'filmed statements' from those who knew her and other bits of filmed documentary evidence and the other on Strachey, to be filmed by Russell and which would be a 'dramatised' documentary. Despite Swallow's defence of Russell's credentials, his admiration of the author and the BBC's faith in Russell<sup>57</sup> Partridge rebutted the notion of a dramatized documentary telling Swallow:-

None of the people chiefly concerned (Carrington's brother Noel Carrington, Alix Strachey and myself) would in the least object to a documentary based on Holroyd's book but we are deeply distressed at the idea of our sisters, husbands, relatives and friends fictionally for no actors performance however good can be other than grotesque to those who knew the originals intimately. [...] I want to make it plain that the question of whether Ken Russell is or is not a good film maker has no bearing on the question. Whereas we were

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

prepared to co-operate in a literary history, and did so fully and to the best of our ability, we are not ready to take the same attitude to dramatization<sup>58</sup>.

There was one more chief sticking point:-

I am afraid I am very far from giving you approval and support. You say that Michael Holroyd is allowing you to refer to his biography. The book is of course largely made up of quotations from copyright materials in the form of letters and diaries; the copyright in nearly all of these belong either to Alix Strachey (in the case of Lytton) or myself (in the case of Carrington). I think I should state here in writing that neither of us is prepared to give permission to the BBC to use any of this material for dramatization<sup>59</sup>.

These letters evidence the complex copyright issues that Russell often faced in his productions (an issue that affected the production of *The Debussy Film* also). It's worth noting also, from correspondences at the BBC written archives that Russell had for a while harboured a desire to make the Carrington / Strachey story and had even proposed it as the subject of a Wednesday Play:

Couldn't there be a floating spot in the Wednesday Play series for films like 'Delius' or more particularly for 'Lytton Strachey and Carrington' – the subject of my next?<sup>60</sup>

Christopher Hampton's film *Carrington* (1995) starring Emma Thompson as Carrington and Jonathan Pryce as Strachey, was finally made with Partridge's blessing – finally convinced by Holroyd on the grounds that the events of the film so remote and most of the people who originally objected were now dead. Russell's attempt in 1968, which remains the first stage in the evolution of the project.

## 5. Conclusion

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Ken Russell to Huw Wheldon, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1968, BBC Written Archives, Caversham, T53/118/2.

Although this has been, by no means, a comprehensive survey, this discussion has aimed to bring to the fore some of the major unrealised projects stemming from between 1959 and 1968. What emerges from a study of these projects is that Russell, a director (in)famous for his baroque, experimental, romantic, visually spectacular, iconoclastic and bombastic cinematic vision, which he would come to be defined by even more throughout the 1970s with films like *The Music Lovers*, *The Devils*, *The Boyfriend* (1971), *Savage Messiah* (1972) *Mahler Tommy*, *Lisztomania* (1975) and *Valentino*, was as far back as the late 1950s chomping at the bit to indulge this natural cinematic inclination – sometimes to his detriment and the detriment of productions he was working on. If this period seems littered with discarded projects however, they were not lost – abandoned, left incomplete or victims of forces outside his control (sometimes within his control) , these projects were never forgotten and form the cement that connects his existing projects frequently recycled, forming the basis of later projects. As such they cannot be disregarded, they become essential to an understanding of both Russell and his work. The next decade would see Russell’s most celebrated period and it too would be built (at least in part) upon the foundation of a range of unrealised projects and “Shadow Cinema”.

With thanks to Stewart Williams for the many engaging and illuminating discussions and insights.

