

Dante's Inferno: Seeing Ken Russell Through Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The name Ken Russell appears to evoke more controversy than that of any other established filmmaker now at work. The string of adjectives ("excessive," "outrageous," "bizarre") usually associated with his films¹ goes back to the days when he was considered the "Wild Man of Telly Biopics"² at the BBC, and this fact is not without significance. Roger Manvell, in his fine little book *New Cinema in Britain*, discusses the patterns of change in British cinema of the 60's and sees the impact of experimental filmmaking for television as the most important force establishing new trends in the cinema. Certainly the film industry recruited many of its new directors (Ken Hughes, Ted Kotcheff, Philip Saville, Peter Collinson, Peter Watkins, Kenneth Loach, and Russell) from television, and it is no secret that the techniques employed in feature films of many of these directors, especially Watkins, Loach, and Russell, grew out of their television films. Thus, any serious consideration of these directors must not neglect the films made for the Telly.

It was during his years at the BBC that Russell established a kind of stock company, consisting of Oliver Reed, Max Adrian, Murray Melvin, Christopher Logue (the one-time socialist poet), Iza Teller, and Judith Paris among others, whose names are frequently found in the cast listings of the feature films. It was also during this period that Russell began his experiments with music, his peculiar manipulation of anachronism, and his achievement of the rich visual, almost baroque, splendor which so frequently punctuate his films. Still, it should be clearly understood that Russell's BBC films are not merely apprenticeship pieces of a budding film director. They are full-blown works of artistic integrity, as most Americans who have seen *Isadora*, *A Song of Summer* and *Dante's Inferno* on the NET Biography series can verify.

The 90-minute film biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti entitled *Dante's Inferno* (1967) is probably the most daring of the three films seen on American TV, and, unlike the others, it is available in this country in 16 mm distribution.³ Film societies and college film groups especially interested in presenting recent but rarely seen quality films should take note, and anyone seriously interested in Russell should certainly consider this film, which seems to contain the essence of the Russell vision and method.

Perhaps on first viewing, the film may appear wildly episodic, strangely disorienting, self-indulgent, and extreme to the point of serious distortion. Yet with repeated viewings and research into Rossetti's life, the viewer soon

realizes that Russell, like Hamlet, is but mad north-northwest. When the wind is southerly, he, too, knows a hawk from a handsaw.

In no sense is *Dante's Inferno* a conventional film biography showing the chronological development of a man from childhood to death; instead, Russell imposes a subtle cyclical structure which — although it allows for chronological designation, mostly through casual references from the narrator — more strongly suggests change through the repetition of images, music, verbal links, and even setting. Within this framework, Russell concentrates on what he sees as the central conflict of Rossetti's life — the discrepancy between his ideals of truth, chivalry, and beauty which form the basis of his exalted vision of womanhood and what simply might be called his highly sexed nature. This emphasis, in turn, reveals Rossetti's neurotic characteristics of repetitive, obsessional thoughts and feelings and further assists to justify the film's structure since the content, to some degree, dictates the form. In Rossetti's later years, "life was but a series of emotional and intellectual cycles, of repetitions. And in time when the wheel stopped, both Rossetti and Swinburne became static, fell away from reality into retrospect, dream, disillusion, indifference, infantilism or despair."⁴

This approach is not an attempt to reduce the man to a simplistic level; rather it provides the focus through which Russell interprets the truth as he sees it, which, of course, he does rather freely. "Over and over again, I've had people saying I make everything up. No one believes what I show because it's so bizarre and shaking, but, in fact it's all true,"⁵ says the defensive director about his films; and the accusation that his films are not true to the facts is one of those most frequently brought against him. Jan Dawson in *Sight and Sound*, for instance, claims that whether Russell's subject is Lawrence's Midlands (*Women in Love*), Tchaikovsky's Moscow (*The Music Lovers*), Huxley's Loudun (*The Devils*), or even Sandy Wilson's nostalgic musical (*The Boy Friend*), he "approaches his source material as a tattered poster upon which to scrawl . . . outsized and eye-catching graffiti."⁶

A discussion of the validity of this claim is the province of another essay, but it should be noted that Russell's approach in most of these films is not unlike his method in *Dante's Inferno*. Once he finds some basis in fact or in the original source for his focus, he builds his own vision. Accordingly, for some, this method pushes too far from "the truth," but, at this point, one must at least raise the question of whether all films should be letter faithful to biographical facts and literary sources or whether they should instead try to capture the visual essence or spirit of the original. Needless to say, for many, pedestrian faithfulness is a virtue, but not so for Russell. His imaginary edifices, although cemented with fact, are always built from his "interpretation" of the facts. At times, some sequences or even entire films are impressive, but others unfortunately become top-heavy and collapse under excessive interpretation. Still, perhaps it is this willingness to risk failure that makes Russell's work so exciting.

In any event, *Dante's Inferno* stands strikingly impressive, and Oswald Doughty's biography *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Victorian Romantic*, David Sonstroem's *Rossetti and the Fair Lady*, and some of Rossetti's letters suggest that even the most outlandish "interpretations" in the film have a factual basis. Indeed, there were childish apple fights, endless examples of teasing "Topsy" Morris, and even days when the members of "The Jovial

Campaign" (Morris, Jones, Swinburne, Rossetti, and a few others) donned suits of armor for medieval escapades.

The treatment of some of the characters who surround Rossetti might be objected to, but even here Russell is usually not without some shred of support. He portrays Janey Morris, the "darling" of the Brotherhood, as a bored, beautiful, mindless woman who plays with a yo-yo while posing as Guinevere for Rossetti's fresco. Surely, this presentation is both comic and extreme; but, to the modern scholar, the personality of the real Janey still remains elusive. Some of her contemporaries claimed she was an admirable talker; others found her shy, retiring, and, at times, rather silly. Watts-Dunston, a friend of Rossetti, claimed that Janey was intellectually superior to her husband, but George Bernard Shaw denied this after she placed suet pudding before the famous vegetarian.

The most obvious discrepancies in the film deal with the condensing of Rossetti's two extended periods of residence at Kelmscott Manor into one in order, perhaps, to better serve the theme of the role of women in Rossetti's life and to downplay any other possible motives for his attempted suicide. Also, the sequences depicting Lizzie's visit to Oxford and the confrontation of Janey, Fanny, and Dante Gabriel after the suicide attempt can only be defended on aesthetic grounds.

The more one knows about the Pre-Raphaelites, however, the more one can only be impressed with Russell's accomplishment. The actors and actresses look strikingly similar to the people they portray, and often the monologues spoken in the film are taken from the characters' letters or journals. Even the very composition of many of Russell's shots are modeled after Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Occasionally, scenes which appear gratuitous or slightly ridiculous assume new meaning in the light of further knowledge of the subjects involved. When Dante Gabriel attempts to kill himself, he breaks through a glass window, stumbles through his weird menagerie, smashes into cages of doves and falls to the ground. The camera lingers on the swirling cages, then cuts to a medium close-up of Rossetti as a snake crawls over his face. The phallic symbolism is obvious, but the lingering shots of the doves take on additional nuances with the knowledge that one of Rossetti's favorite names for Lizzie was "Dove," and, in this context, the scene helps to prepare for the nature of the fantasy sequence to follow.

If much of the film is firmly grounded in probability, much is also constructed from Russell's imagination, and thus there are scenes consciously intended to jolt the passive viewer. The short prologue to the film, for instance, shows a casket being removed from a grave. The camera assumes the perspective of those about to open the casket, and when the lid is removed, the corpse of a woman is revealed. A hand reaches into the coffin and removes what appears to be a book. The camera then zooms in for a close-up of the decayed face of the corpse. Cut to the title *Dante's Inferno* followed by the subtitle "The Private Life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti." Thus, we immediately realize that the film will center on the man and not on the ideological concerns of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but what we do not yet know is that the desecration of the grave of Rossetti's wife seen in the prologue is offered by Russell as the single most important act in the creation of Rossetti's guilt-ridden, self-created torment.

The shock element of the prologue is carried over into the first sequence as Dante Gabriel (Oliver Reed) leaps across a bonfire and out at the camera. The

narrator (Austin Frazer) sets the scene as the turbulent year of 1848 and briefly describes the concerns of the artists who formed the PRB. This short introductory sequence then closes with a shot of Lizzie Siddal (Judith Paris) in armor as seen through a torch held by Rossetti. She is to be the inspiration of the PRB; but since Russell's chief interest is with the private man, in the next sequence we see Rossetti acquiring, if not the method of painting, then the model. Lizzie is posing as Ophelia for John Everett Millais, and although Dante Gabriel met Lizzie long before she modeled for this painting, Russell introduces them at this point to comment on the nature of their future relationship. Like Hamlet, Dante Gabriel will help to drive his Ophelia to the point of distraction and eventual suicide, and it is this image of Lizzie as Ophelia which continually haunts him — so much so that he, too, is tempted to death by drowning.

Just as Rossetti embellished his paintings with significant symbolic objects (cups, swords, bells, etc.), Russell adorns his film biography with appropriate objects that extend visual parallels and suggestions much like ripples in a pool after being pierced by a stone. Surely, the tub in which Lizzie models as Ophelia is transformed into her casket — just as Ruskin's box of health-restoring ivory dust parallels Howell's case containing the volume of poetry ripped from Lizzie's grave. The idealized objects of the richly textured paintings also have their counterparts in the mundane world. Lizzie's sword of inspiration becomes the sewing needle she wields to ward off the amorous advances of a frustrated Dante Gabriel, and her golden chalice finds its counterpart in the glass of laudanum she drinks to take her own life.

This method of accumulating and paralleling visual images is also supported by the use of music in the film. Russell's love of music is well known ("if I could compose, I wouldn't make films; music for me is the most incredible event in the history of the human race"),⁷ and his eclectic score for this film is exceptional. Pleasant zither music serves as a type of *leit motif* during the extended courtship of Dante Gabriel and Lizzie, but much later this music turns sinister when used in The Grand Turkish Rooms sequence to haunt the anxiety-ridden Rossetti. An interlude from Berg's *Wozzack* and various excerpts from Holst's *The Planets* set mood but also offer a rich context for allusion, and pseudo-Eastern pieces provide musical satire on William Holman Hunt. The most intriguing use of music, however, is the bouncy caliope which belts out such tunes as "Ma, He's Making Eyes at Me," and which seems, at first, hopelessly out of place. Yet the short sequence of Rossetti chasing cows, sheep, and Fanny Cornforth (Pat Ashton) against a musical background of "There's No Business Like Show Business" seems somehow appropriate for Ruskin's remark that Rossetti "will never be happy nor truly powerful till he gets over the habit of doing nothing but what pleases him." This anachronistic song is a representation of the spontaneous, loony, over-sexed side of the protagonist, and Russell succeeds in disorienting the audience with music rather than with the flashy, over-done, visual gimmicks that another director might have employed. In turn, this feeling of disorientation or comic relief tends to reduce the probability of any heavy-handed moral censure or massive lack of sympathy for the protagonist at this point in the film.

The editing in the film also supports the idea of development through parallelism, since the women in Rossetti's life are often pictured in similar fashion. For instance, Annie Miller on the see-saw should come to mind when, much later in the film, we see Janey Morris on the swing just before

her husband departs for Iceland. The situations are nearly identical. Hunt had left Annie in Rossetti's care while on a journey, and Morris is about to do the same. More often than not, however, the women are juxtaposed in some fashion to Lizzie Siddal. Fanny Cornforth, "the faithful elephant," offers Dante Gabriel the sexual release that Lizzie denies him before marriage and is presented as an "image of savage, active health" in contrast to pale Lizzie, "the sick elephant." The cross-cutting of fun-loving Annie Miller with long-suffering Lizzie enduring "the cure" on the coast of France is even more direct, but this technique also prepares for one of the most extravagant sequences in the film — a moment of pure fabrication. Lizzie's return from France is similar to the famous Inn at Upton sequence from Tony Richardson's *Tom Jones*; Lizzie, Fanny, Annie, Ruskin, and Dante Gabriel's family converge on the studio at the same time — with wildly comic results — but Russell again underscores the comedy with music rather than with visual gimmicks.

The use of setting is notable throughout the film but is especially impressive when employed for purposes of parallelism or contrast. The fortunes of Lizzie and Dante Gabriel, for instance, are revealed against an exquisite lake shore scene which also incorporates the detailed background of Millais' famous portrait of John Ruskin. Early in the film, the initial charm of the chaste young lovers is suggested through the lyrical music (probably from Delius), the lush photography, Dante Gabriel's composition of poetry for Miss Siddal, and finally his spontaneous tossing of her bonnet over the hillside as the symbolic act of freeing her from Madame Tozer's dress shop. Later, after the marriage, they return to the same scene, accompanied by an elegiac rendering of the wedding march, as Dante Gabriel recites "Even So," a poem that clearly shows that the joys of their past can never be recaptured. This idea is further emphasized visually through the limited and controlled use of slow motion and through a lingering long shot of the newly married couple standing side by side looking out at the lake.

In the last sequence, Dante Gabriel returns to this scene accompanied by a doxy. The background music, "Saturn, Bringer of Old Age" from *The Planets*, is appropriate, as the aging Rossetti, desperate and drugged from chloral, reaches out to the "ghost" of the long departed Lizzie and mumbles the closing of "Alas, So Long," a poem probably inspired by her idealized youth:

Ah! dear one, you've been dead so long, —
 How long until we meet again,
 Where hours may never lose their song
 Nor flowers forget the rain
 In glad noonlight that never shall wane?
 Alas, so long!
 Ah! shall it be then Spring weather,
 And ah! shall we be young together?

Finally, as a parting gesture, he throws his bottle over the hillside, and this act, in contrast to the earlier tossing of the bonnet, brings the film full cycle. Who needs to see Rossetti's death after this moving sequence?

The film, like any, is not without faults. The ambivalent attitude of the filmmaker towards the artistic achievements of the Pre-Raphaelites, although so typical of Russell's method, can occasionally become annoying, and some of the fantasy sequences depicting Lizzie's corpse are straight out of a grade B horror flick. Yet even with these minor problems, *Dante's Inferno* stands as a

major artistic accomplishment; and — perhaps more accurately than a film such as *The Devils*, whose broad scope, subject matter, and increased risks tend to overemphasize some of Russell's problems — it illustrates the methods and imagination of one of Britain's most exciting directors.

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NOTES

¹ Ken Russell has made seven feature films to date: *French Dressing* (1963), *The Billion Dollar Brain* (1967), *Women in Love* (1970), *The Music Lovers* (1970), *The Devils* (1971), *The Boy Friend* (1971), and *Savage Messiah* (1972).

² Lee Langley, "Ken Russell: A Director Who Demands the Right To Be Outrageous," *Show*, 2, No. 8 (October 1971), 38.

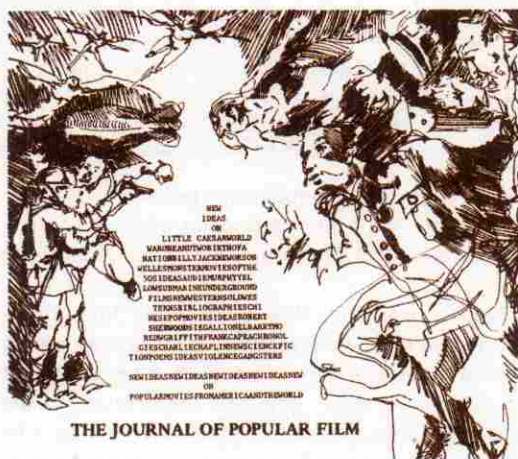
³ Time-Life Films distributes the film in the United States, and the present rental fee is \$75.00.

⁴ Oswald Doughty, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Victorian Romantic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 475.

⁵ Cited in Langley, *Show*, p. 37.

⁶ Jan Dawson, "The Boy Friend," *Sight and Sound*, 41, No. 2 (Spring 1972), 111.

⁷ Cited in Langley, *Show*, p. 38.



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