

'Blurring the lines between fact and fiction': Ken Russell, the BBC and 'television biography'

John Hill

Abstract:

Working for the BBC arts programmes *Monitor* and *Omnibus* during the 1960s, the director Ken Russell was responsible for a series of biographical films based on the lives of painters and composers. Tracing the development of Russell's work from *Prokofiev* (1961) and *Elgar* (1962) through to *Bartok* (1964) and *The Debussy Film* (1965), the article examines 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. As a result of its unusually explicit representations of sex and violence, Russell's film about the composer Richard Strauss, *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), took these arguments to a new level. Through an examination of the responses that the film generated, the article concludes that, due to the degree to which the programme departed from BBC norms of documentary practice, and the related values of 'impartiality' and 'good taste', it became a work that tested the very limits of what the BBC then considered it possible to transmit.

Keywords: BBC; Ken Russell; Ken Loach; Huw Wheldon; David Attenborough; *Monitor*; *Omnibus*; documentary; drama documentary; television biography; *Elgar*; *The Debussy Film*; *Dance of the Seven Veils*; Richard Strauss.

It has become something of a commonplace within British film and television studies to counterpose a dominant tradition of 'documentary-realist' practice to alternative

filmmaking currents associated with melodrama, visual stylisation and fantasy. By this token, it would be conventional to identify the 'social-realist' director Ken Loach and the 'neo-romantic' Ken Russell with fundamentally different strands of British cinema. As Roy Armes puts it, in his historical overview of British filmmaking, '[n]othing could be further from Russell's extrovert fantasy style than the sober naturalism of Kenneth Loach' (1978: 307). Although it would be difficult to argue that the two men do, in fact, possess a shared aesthetic, it is possible nevertheless to identify a number of common features in their work for the BBC in the 1960s. This is not only because Loach's work was more self-consciously modernist and 'experimental' than it subsequently became but also because Loach and Russell possessed a common interest in challenging the norms of television production of the time. Both were committed to shooting on film rather than in the television studio; both men's work disturbed the traditional boundaries between documentary and drama (and the ideas of 'fact' and 'fiction' with which they were associated) and, because of this, both men were involved in the emergence and, to some extent, the 'invention' of new hybrid, televisual forms (the 'dramatised documentary' and the 'documentary drama'). In doing so, both came to be recognised as television 'auteurs' but also acquired a reputation as provocateurs, not only subverting the conventional forms of television but also testing the limits of what the BBC then considered it permissible to broadcast.

In the article that follows, I propose to locate Ken Russell's BBC 'documentaries' in the context of the institutional pressures and constraints governing 'documentary' production in the 1960s and early 1970s. By drawing on the relevant files held at the BBC Written Archives, I seek to identify the ways in which Russell's desire to import elements of drama into documentary challenged generic boundaries and led to arguments within the BBC, and beyond, about the mixing of 'fact' and 'fiction'. These revolved in particular around the 'balance' between 'dramatic reconstruction' and 'interpretation' in Russell's work and its

implications for the way in which the subject-matter of the films – primarily the lives of artists and composers - was treated. As Russell's status grew within the BBC, these tensions increased and finally came to a head with *Dance of the Seven Veils* (BBC1, 15 February 1970), Russell's film about the composer Richard Strauss. By focusing on the controversy that this film created, the article will indicate how Russell not only tested the boundaries of documentary at this time but also the BBC's own 'bounds of transmittability'.

'Mixing fact and fiction'

Although the work of both Russell and Loach in the 1960s demonstrated a mixing of documentary and drama conventions, the two men were, of course, setting out to do so from different ends of the spectrum. As Christophe Van Eecke (2013) has put it, the 'new BBC drama', with which Loach was identified, aspired to the 'condition of documentary' whereas Russell's documentaries were evolving towards 'the condition of drama'.¹ Loach was working for the BBC's Drama Department and productions such as *Up the Junction* (BBC1 3 November 1965), *Cathy Come Home* (BBC1 16 November 1966) and *The Big Flame* (BBC1 19 February 1969) aroused criticism as a result of their introduction into drama of elements associated with documentary. Russell, however, was working for the Talks Department, and later the Documentary and Music Department, and his films for the arts programmes *Monitor* (1958-65) and *Omnibus* (1967-2002) provoked concerns due to their use of dramatisation within a supposedly documentary format. Underpinning the criticisms of both men's work, however, was a shared concern within the BBC regarding the lines of division that it was believed ought to exist between drama and documentary. These, in turn, were linked to arguments about factual accuracy, 'balance' in the treatment of subject-matter and the presumed reactions of viewers to programmes that might be seen to mix - or, in the eyes of their critics, confuse - different elements.

Such arguments arose in relation to Russell's work from the very start of his BBC career. During the making of his first short film for *Monitor* on the poet John Betjeman, *Poet's London* (BBC 1 March 1959), Russell apparently filmed a short scene showing Betjeman as a young boy. Huw Wheldon, the overall editor and presenter of the *Monitor* series, objected, however, to the 'falsity' of the scene and demanded that it be cut (Baxter 1973: 123; Sutton 2012: 190-1). This proved to be the first of a number of run-ins with Wheldon regarding the use of dramatisation in Russell's films concerned with artists and composers. Although these disputes are sometimes treated as if they were simply a historical hangover or the product of Wheldon's personal prejudices, they were, in fact, the product of a more deep-seated anxiety within public-service broadcasting about the mixing of fact and fiction within television programmes. What was originally referred to as the 'story documentary' had initially emerged, without controversy, during the 1950s as a means of circumventing the studio-bound limitations of television technology. However, in the wake of developments in camera and sound recording technology (that increased the feasibility of location shooting), and the changes in attitude towards documentary and current affairs that these wrought, the use of dramatisation in programmes laying claim to being factual became the object of increased scrutiny and debate. This arose, in part, due to the proximity of fictional and factual programmes in the television schedule and the resulting concern that these should be clearly distinguishable in the viewer's mind.

This proved to be an enduring concern throughout Wheldon's career and, when he was Managing Director of Television, he commissioned a pamphlet (mainly written by the Head of Television Documentary, Richard Cawston) entitled *Principles and Practice in Documentary Programmes* (1972) calling for the clear 'labelling' of programmes in order to avoid confusion in the minds of audiences. As the pamphlet put it, '[n]ot only must the audience know that they are watching a documentary, as opposed to a play; they must know that it is a documentary which

sets out to do this or that, and to do it from certain standpoints only' (BBC 1972: 17).² This expectation of a clearly identifiable differentiation between the two categories derived from a belief that the mixing of drama and documentary not only possessed the potential to mislead audiences but also to undermine the integrity of factual programmes and, with it, the reputation and standing of the BBC itself. As the former Editor of *Panorama* and Head of the Current Affairs Group, Paul Fox, explained in an interview (when Controller of BBC1):

I think mixing fact and fiction knocks and denigrates the whole integrity and authority of the BBC. One of the great things we've got going for us is the authority and the truthfulness of the News and Current Affairs services, and if we start mixing fact and fiction I think we lose that credibility (Bakewell and Garnham 1970: 236).³

Panorama had, of course, emerged from the Talks Department as did the news magazine programme, *Tonight*, which is commonly taken to have been a loose inspiration for the arts magazine format of *Monitor*. This meant that Russell's work initially took place in a context in which a concern for the 'integrity' of factual programming possessed a particular premium. Indeed, the Assistant Head of Talks, Grace Wyndham Goldie, was known to be hostile to documentaries in the cinematic tradition, which she felt were too personal and subjective, and she exhibited a degree of disdain for what she regarded as the 'film directors *manqué*', such as Russell and John Schlesinger, who had been employed by *Monitor* (Bakewell and Garnham: 135).⁴ Although Wyndham Goldie was mainly concerned with the treatment of current events, the BBC's insistence on factual 'accuracy' also extended, as the example from *Poet's London* indicates, to documentary representations of the past which it was believed should be shown with a minimum of 'dramatic invention'. Thus, while Wheldon accepted the legitimacy of plays about historical figures, it was the introduction of dramatised scenes into documentaries (that employed documentary devices such as voice-overs, interviews, stills and so on) that he

considered to be especially 'artificial' and lacking in the insight that 'a real play, written as a work of art' might be expected to provide (Baxter: 122). Norman Swallow, who as Assistant Head of Television Films had not only recommended Russell to Wheldon but commissioned Russell's short film *A House in Bayswater* (BBC 14 December 1960), shared this wariness regarding the use of costumed actors, a practice which he argued could destroy the mood of a biographical documentary as well as undermine its claim to authenticity (1966: 160).⁵

In this respect, the experimentalism of Russell's work might be said to reside in its challenge to the conventional distinctions between 'drama' and 'documentary' employed by the BBC at this time and its engagement in the creation of new hybridised forms that drew on the conventions of both. In his discussion of a later period of television documentary, John Ellis suggests that television's regime of 'factuality' may face 'a crisis in genre relations' when 'material proposed as fact involves more fictional elements than the current generic understandings would allow' (2005: 351-2). Russell's work, therefore, might be said to have provoked a degree of 'crisis in genre relations' by virtue of the way in which it subverted the regime of 'factuality' that was conventionally associated with the arts documentary. This also meant that the labelling of his work presented something of a problem. Although a number of critics have described the BBC films as 'biopics', the BBC's concerns about dramatisation meant that they were in fact keen to differentiate Russell's work from what was regarded as an overly fictionalised (and melodramatised) genre. The BBC's own preferred term was 'television biography' but critical responses to Russell's work often revealed a degree of hesitation amongst reviewers about how their mixing of generic features might best be described. Thus, at various times Russell's programmes were referred to in the press as 'documentary reconstruction' (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 December 1967), 'films reconstructing the lives of great artists' (*Guardian*, 23 September 1966), 'fictionalised biography' (*Observer*, 24 December 1967), 'impressionistic biographies' (*Daily Mail*, 30 June 1965),

'biographical essays' (*Observer*, 4 July 1965) and, in the case of one reviewer struggling to describe *The Debussy Film*, 'play, dramatic biography or what-have-you' (*Daily Express*, 19 May 1965).

'A new form of television biography'

To this extent, Russell's career at the BBC may partly be read as a slow war of attrition to shift the arts documentary in the direction of drama. Russell's first short films for *Monitor*, such as *Poet's London*, *Gordon Jacob* (BBC 29 March 1959), *Colquhoun and MacBryde* (BBC 25 October 1959) and *Portrait of a Goon* (about Spike Milligan) (BBC 16 December 1959), dealt with living subjects who were not only available to be interviewed but were also willing, to varying degrees, to perform for the camera or even - as in the case of the pop artists featured in *Pop Goes the Easel* (BBC 25 March 1962) - participate in 'fantasy' sequences. The turn to historical figures, however, presented new challenges of visual representation, particularly when little or no film footage of those concerned survived. The turning-point, in this regard, was Russell's half-hour 'portrait' of the Soviet composer, *Prokofiev* (BBC 18 June 1961). This was self-consciously promoted by the programme's producer Humphrey Burton as 'a new form of television biography' that combined the use of pre-existing film (that included extracts from *October* and *Alexander Nevsky*), stills and 'specially shot BBC film'.⁶ The new material included scenes involving what was described as 'dramatised reconstruction' in which actors were employed to portray not only Prokofiev himself (at different ages) but also other historical figures (such as Glazunov, the director of the St Petersburg Conservatoire) and incidental characters (such as the housemaid shown packing Prokofiev's suitcase). This emphasis upon 'dramatised reconstruction', rather than simply 'dramatisation', was deliberate and was intended to indicate how these scenes still maintained a 'documentary' basis in recorded fact and could, therefore, be understood to constitute more than fictional invention or speculation. Nevertheless, given the level of suspicion within the BBC towards the combination of drama and documentary, the film's use of costumed

actors remains highly restrained. The actors do not talk and Prokofiev's face is never directly shown (the closest the film gets to this is a reflection in water). This means that when Prokofiev is shown playing the piano - practising with his mother, for example, or performing at the conservatoire - it is only his hands that are visible. In other scenes, such as those with his tutor at the conservatoire or working at home, it is only his back or his arms and waist that we see. According to Ferris (1990: 149), the original version of the film did include a shot of Prokofiev on his death-bed. However, this was apparently removed at the insistence of Wheldon and Wyndham Goldie and the film now concludes with a series of actual photographs of Prokofiev taken at different stages of his life.⁷

This oblique approach to the use of actors carried over into Russell's breakthrough project, *Elgar* (BBC 11 November 1962), which once again combined newly staged scenes with the use of stills and newsreel footage. Russell had been enthusiastic about making a film about Elgar since joining the BBC and had prepared a treatment for Norman Swallow, then Assistant Head of Television Films, as early as 1959. Swallow, however, had warned of 'the possible disaster that might arise from using actors in the suggested way' while Lionel Salter, the Head of Music Productions, who was also consulted on the matter, declared that it was 'impossible' for actors to 'impersonate... composers and their families' in a 'convincing' manner.⁸ Concerns such as these were sufficient to stall the project until it was eventually revived for *Monitor* in the wake of the success of *Prokofiev*. However, the use of staged scenes involving actors remained a sensitive issue and, in his promotion of the film, Humphrey Burton described *Elgar* as 'a "biographical" film, with reconstructed scenes, rather than a dramatic presentation' which, he explained, meant that the production had 'played the actors down'.⁹ So, while the number of dramatised scenes in the film is considerably greater than in *Prokofiev*, the use of dialogue and 'classical' editing techniques (involving close-ups, reverse-field cutting and point-of-view shots) is studiously avoided. As had been the case with *Prokofiev*,

the emphasis upon 'reconstructed scenes' rather than 'dramatic presentation' also carried the claim that such scenes were not the director's invention but possessed a basis in fact (and, thus, a level of 'documentary' validity). Indeed, Russell (1989: 26-7) himself reports how he was called upon to defend scenes such as those involving Elgar flying a kite or sliding down a hill on a tray on the grounds that they were, in fact, 'true'.¹⁰

However, despite such claims, it is also clear that the film subjects the ideology of documentary reconstruction to considerable strain. This was partly due to the flimsiness of the available historical record which meant that some of the film's most famous 'reconstructions' – such as a young Elgar riding across the Malvern Hills on a pony – appear to have possessed relatively little basis in fact. It was also a consequence of the considerable creative leeway that Russell still retained in visualising events for which he may well have been able to claim factual evidence but which were hardly likely to have occurred in the manner in which they are presented within the film (as in the heavily stylised treatment of Elgar's departure from the Wembley Empire Exhibition in 1924). So, while there was an institutional pressure to try and maintain a distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction', it was nevertheless clear that Russell's evolving approach to artistic biography could not be restricted to fact-based 'reconstruction' but involved subjective interpretation of both the personalities involved and the art and music that they created. In the case of *Elgar*, this was most obvious in the mild controversy that arose from the film's use of war imagery (including shots of trench warfare and injured soldiers) to accompany 'Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1' (the music for 'Land of Hope and Glory') which was criticised for misrepresenting Elgar's attitudes towards both his own music and the First World War.¹¹ This particular sequence may also be understood as part of a strategy, on the part of the film, to rescue Elgar from his reputation as a bombastic patriot and to reclaim him as a 'composer of visionary intensity' (Gardiner 2003: 202). In this respect, the film may be seen to shift gear away from 'reconstructions' of events in Elgar's life towards the visions inspired by his music.

This is achieved most strikingly in the scene linked to 'The Dream of Gerontius', a choral work based on John Henry Newman's poem, in which the crosses at Calvary are shown to appear atop the Malvern Hills. This is one of the film's most striking series of images but clearly goes well beyond 'reconstruction' and, in so doing, points to a tension within Russell's work that was destined to become increasingly pronounced.

According to Russell, his aim in making films about composers was not 'to produce a factual, day-by-day account of the composer's life' but to communicate 'the spirit of the composer as manifest in his music' (1993: 75). This is, however, an ambivalent formulation that partly suggests that it is the music itself, rather than the composer's life, that provides the key to an understanding of the composer and, thus, his 'spirit'. Traditionally, of course, the rationale underpinning the biographical approach to an artist or composer is that the telling of the story of an artist's life has the capacity to shed light on the origins of, or inspiration for, the work that the artist has created. In the case of *Elgar*, these kinds of biographical links are made relatively evident. The composer's music is seen to grow out of, and draw sustenance from, Elgar's relationship with the countryside (the Malvern Hills) where he grew up and to which he later returns (after first failure and then success in London).¹² The music is also shown to have been inspired by significant moments in Elgar's personal life such as his courtship of Alice (which is associated with the music he wrote for her as an engagement present, 'Salut d'Amour') and then her death (which is tied to a sequence featuring the 'Cello Concerto'). The final sequence of the film, featuring music from the 'Enigma Variations' ('Nimrod'), is also explicitly linked to Elgar's desire to recall (through a series of flashbacks) the 'moments and people and places' that had been central to his life and, by implication, to the creation of his music. In a similar manner, it is also possible to read the imagery of 'The Dream of Gerontius' sequence in terms of an attempt to give a visual manifestation to Elgar's own vision.

However, the sequence also blurs the lines of division between what might be hypothesised to be Elgar's 'fantasy' (after Newman) and Russell's own

interpretation, or 'vision', of the music and the 'spirit' which it has evoked for him. Russell used to recall how his discovery of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor not only helped to rescue him from a nervous breakdown but had provided the source of his 'visions' whereby he would hear music and see pictures at the same time (Tibbetts 2005: 40). In this respect, Russell's drive to visualise his own responses to the music to which he listened did not depend upon biographical knowledge and, thus, might be said to be potentially at odds with the logic of the biographical approach. Accordingly, there is a growing degree of tension within Russell's BBC films between the 'documentary' effort of the films to anchor the imagery associated with the music to the biographical details of a composer or artist's life (as required by the broadcasting institution) and the – potentially countervailing - impulse to give free rein to the director's own 'visions' as prompted by the music or, as partly occurs in *Elgar*, to equate the director's own visions with those of the composer.

This move in the direction of an increased emphasis upon Russell's own response to, and interpretation of, the music may be found in *Bela Bartok* (1964). The promotion surrounding the programme indicated that it was not conceived as 'a straightforward biographic treatment of Bartok' and avoided the 'strict narration' that had been employed in *Prokofiev* and *Elgar*.¹³ This meant that along with an extensive use of pre-existing footage (ranging from the Hungarian film *Hortobágy* to *Triumph of the Will*), the programme employs 'highly "imaginative" interpretive filming' that was intended 'to capture both the quality of Bartok's music and the nature of the man himself'.¹⁴ In comparison to *Elgar*, the actual representation of Bartok the man was relatively sparse but nonetheless highly distinctive. The avoidance of dialogue was maintained but Bartók, played by the actor Boris Ranevsky, was shown in dramatic close-ups as he sits in a New York room listening to a phonograph. His sense of exile, and alienation, in New York is also communicated in a disquieting sequence involving shots of him descending an underground escalator where he is stared at by other travellers. The viewer,

however, is hardly encouraged by the film to regard these as factual 'reconstructions'. For, due to the ways in which composition, editing and music are employed, scenes such as these are primarily 'impressionistic' in character, designed less to reveal 'what happened' than to give outward expression to Bartók's inner feelings and emotions. The sequences involving the music - particularly the ballet 'The Miraculous Mandarin' and the opera 'Duke Bluebeard's Castle' - are even more openly interpretative. In the case of 'The Miraculous Mandarin', there is no attempt to present it as dance but rather to re-imagine elements of its plot (involving a prostitute and her client) in a contemporary setting through the use of actors (who remain silent). 'Duke Bluebeard's Castle' is also re-located to a modernist London setting (New Zealand House) in a sequence that fuses pre-existing footage (Phillip Donnellan's 1961 steelmaking documentary *Men of Corby* 'made strange' through juxtaposition) with imaginative fantasy (Bluebird's former wives in blank face-masks apparently imprisoned inside a 'beauty parlour'). While the film may, as Paul Sutton (2009: 18) suggests, propose that images such as these should be understood in terms of Bartók's own 'fantastical visions' (or, at least, the visions of the 'bald-headed man with strange, staring eyes' who represents Bartók in the film), the visual strategies of *mise-en-scène*, iconography and montage that the film employs make it difficult to trace the film's imagery back to Bartók rather than to Russell's own imaginative responses to the musical pieces (and their bare plot outlines).

'The truth of one artist as seen by another'

Russell's departure from what might be regarded as 'factual' documentary proceeded a step further in *The Debussy Film* (BBC1 18 May 1965). Described in the *Radio Times* (13 May 1965: 31) as 'a film about a film unit making a film about Debussy', it is barely a 'documentary' at all insofar as the film unit within the film is an entirely fictional creation (albeit with some parallels to the film that we are watching). Moreover, by exploiting the film-within-a-film device, *The Debussy Film* also circumvents many of the restrictions that had previously constrained Russell's

earlier work. The film is performed entirely by professional actors who are, for the first time, permitted to speak dialogue. Apart from a short opening statement at the film's beginning (spoken by the film's co-writer Melvyn Bragg), the film also dispenses with the anonymous voice-overs that had been a feature of the earlier films. These had been spoken by Huw Wheldon who, by now, had become the Controller of Television Programmes and was much less directly involved in the overseeing of Russell's work. In the absence of a voice-over, it is, therefore, the director within the film (played by Vladek Sheybal) who takes on the role of a surrogate narrator by virtue of the way in which he explains the details of Debussy's life to the members of his cast whom he is preparing for their parts.

The element of self-reflexivity involved in the film-within-a-film structure also renders the film's approach to 'reconstruction' highly complex. In what is commonly taken to be a reference to Wheldon's insistence on factual substantiation (such as Elgar flying a kite), there is a joke at the start of the sequence cut to 'Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune' in which the director announces that Debussy and his mistress, Gaby, did, indeed, play with balloons – 'I checked it'. However, insofar as the film includes debates about, and commentary upon, the life of the composer by both the director and the actors there is also a strong sense that 'reconstruction' necessarily rests upon performance and interpretation (with Oliver Reed, the actor playing Debussy, complaining to the director at one point that a scene 'won't work'). This element of reflection upon the processes of 'reconstruction' becomes even more complicated due to the way in which the behaviour of the actors begins to parallel those of the characters they play and, in doing so, to undermine the distinctions between the two. It was partly on the basis of this device that Russell was able to defend himself against criticisms from Debussy's step-daughter that the film had been misleading about Debussy's life. Although he did insist upon the factual basis of a number of contested events (including the 'balloon incident'), he also claimed that scenes involving the actors – such as the strip-tease to 'Danse Profane' – were

'symbolic' and had 'nothing to do with... Debussy' (albeit that they were clearly to be understood as making a comment upon his emotional predicaments).¹⁵

However, given the convolutions involved in making a film about a film about a composer, *The Debussy Film* could hardly avoid fuelling further anxieties about the 'balance' between evidence-based reconstruction and imaginative, or symbolic, interpretation of a composer's life in Russell's work. One of the more striking features of the reactions to the film was that while there was widespread admiration for its ingenuity and imagination there was also a strong sense that it had revealed much less about Debussy than might have been expected of a 'documentary'. The BBC's meeting to review the week's programmes, for example, revealed a great deal of enthusiasm for what Humphrey Burton, now Head of Television Music and Arts, referred to as 'a work of art for TV' and the Head of Documentary, Richard Cawston, described as 'one of the most exciting films he had ever seen'. This was not sufficient, however, to prevent expressions of disquiet regarding the extent to which 'the imaginative creation of Ken Russell' had taken over from 'the factual details of the composer's life'.¹⁶ Similar views were expressed on the BBC's regular radio review show, *The Critics*, in which the contributors praised the film for its 'imagination and intelligence' but still complained that it had little to do with Debussy whose life had been used as 'a pretext for indulging in... fashionable fantasy'.¹⁷ This view was also to be found in the press and, in an article in the *Times* (23 October 1965), dealing with television's treatment of classical music, the author objected to *The Debussy Film* on the grounds that it 'told you next to nothing about the sources of the composer's inspiration, only a great deal about the maker's directorial virtuosity'.

A factor in the emergence of this kind of critical response was undoubtedly Russell's own rising status as a television director. As a result of the quality and distinctiveness of his work for *Monitor*, his films had increasingly come to be regarded as prestige projects that merited longer running times and larger budgets than other contributions to the series. Thus, in the case of *Elgar*, Wheldon was able to

secure additional funding for the project not only because of the amount of filming that was involved but also on the basis of the film's prospects for winning awards and achieving international sales.¹⁸ The huge success of *Elgar* increased Russell's stock further and *The Debussy Film* became Russell's most expensive and longest-running television biography for the BBC up until that time. This was not fully planned and concerns were expressed within the BBC regarding the project's escalating costs.¹⁹ Russell, however, was able to ride out such storms due to the sheer calibre of the work that he produced. Thus, whatever problems it may have caused in production, *The Debussy Film* still ended up as 'a Monitor Special', featured on the cover of the *Radio Times* (15-21 May 1965) and broadcast (on BBC-1) at an earlier time-slot than would have been normal.

This recognition, and in some cases slightly reluctant acceptance, within the BBC of Russell's status as a special talent was accompanied by an increasing identification of him as a film and television 'auteur'. The repeat of *The Debussy Film* was trailed in the *Radio Times* (9 June 1966: 14) as 'Ken Russell's award-winning film about Debussy' and, by the time he came to make *Dante's Inferno* (BBC1 22 December 1967), his film about the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, this was simply referred to as 'a film by Ken Russell' (*Radio Times*, 22 December 1967: 62).²⁰ This increased sense of Russell's auteur status was, of course, enhanced by his turn to the techniques and devices of 'art cinema' in *The Debussy Film* that encouraged comparisons with both Fellini and Resnais. In this respect, the artistry and 'interpretative' filmmaking that had been a feature of his documentaries could now be understood more clearly as the authorial signature of a filmmaker who might legitimately lay claim to be an 'artist' in his own right (rather than merely the documentary 'servant', or amanuensis, of a great composer or painter). Art cinema has, of course, traditionally been understood to constitute a form of 'personal' cinema manifesting the preoccupations of its director. In this respect, Russell's growing status as an 'auteur' employing film as a means of self-expression was bound to intensify the unease felt by his critics that what Wheldon referred to as

'truth to the artist' was in danger of being sacrificed to Russell's own obsessions and subjective interests (Ferris: 161-2). Indeed, following the transmission of *Dante's Inferno*, it was Wheldon who suggested that the film 'raised the question of in the name of what was it being made' and argued that directors should avoid going 'too far in terms of their own glory, and at the cost of truth, or the standing of others'.²¹

Indeed, this suspicion of a change in regard for 'the standing of others' might also be said to bear a degree of correlation with the changes in Russell's own artistic status or 'standing'. In his first films on composers, there is clearly a concern to encourage awareness and appreciation of artists whom he regards as neglected or undervalued. *Elgar*, as is often noted, played a key role in the re-evaluation of Elgar's music while both *Prokofiev* and *Bela Bartok* paid homage to composers whose work might either be considered to be 'difficult' or only partially understood. By focusing primarily on Debussy's messy relationships with women, *The Debussy Film* is, however, much more critical of its subject and, at one point, the actress playing Debussy's mistress Gaby (Annette Robertson), who attempts suicide as a result of his treatment of her, asks the director whether Debussy was 'really such a bastard'. Although the film does seek to tie Debussy's treatment of women to his struggle to write an opera based on Edgar Allan Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher' at the film's end, *The Debussy Film's* emphasis upon Debussy's egotistical and self-serving behaviour leads to a degree of disjunction between the music and biographical detail that had not previously existed in Russell's work and which appears to have opened up the space for Russell's own authorial concerns and directorial personality to emerge more boldly.

The film, in this respect, might also be said to be the first to indicate the beginnings of Russell's move away from a concern with the broader socio-historical forces (such as war and revolution) that had been a feature of *Prokofiev*, *Elgar* and *Bela Bartok* in favour of a growing interest in sexual themes and imagery. His dramatisation of 'The Miraculous Mandarin' in *Bela Bartok* had led some viewers to complain of its 'distasteful' 'eroticism' but this was not a widespread concern.²² A

much greater number of viewers, however, objected to the emphasis placed upon Debussy's 'womanising' in *The Debussy Film* which they took to be both unnecessary and unilluminating. One viewer referred to the film as just 'one long sex orgy' while another observed that, because Debussy's life 'appeared to be completely taken up with sex', it was 'a miracle' that 'he had time to write any music at all'.²³ Although such views were only representative of a minority, they did, nevertheless, point to an emerging tendency in Russell's work towards increasingly explicit scenes of semi-nudity and sexual activity as well as an enthusiasm for shocking, and possibly merely titillating, the television audience. In terms of his television career, this is a tendency that might be said to culminate in his film about Richard Strauss, *Dance of the Seven Veils* (BBC1 15 February 1970), which effectively brought to an end his run of films at the BBC. The controversy it provoked also brought to a head the many debates about 'fact' and 'fiction', historical accuracy, 'balance' and 'truth to the artist' that had accompanied his previous work. In so doing, it also tested to the limit what the BBC then considered it appropriate and 'permissible' to broadcast.

Dance of the Seven Veils: 'The bounds of transmittability'

When he came to make *Dance of the Seven Veils*, a film about the composer Richard Strauss, Russell's star was clearly in the ascendant. Since *The Debussy Film*, he had made a number of substantial films for the BBC, including *Always on a Sunday* (BBC1 29 June 1965), about the painter Henri Rousseau, *Isadora Duncan* (BBC1 22 September 1966), *Dante's Inferno* (BBC1 22 December 1967) and *Song of Summer* (BBC1 15 September 1968), about the composer Delius and his relationship with Eric Fenby. This last film, which was, in effect, a drama but still referred to as a documentary, had not only been warmly received by its critics for its perceived restraint in comparison to his earlier films but had also succeeded in allaying the BBC's fears that it might prove unnecessarily provocative.²⁴ Russell had also moved into feature film production and, immediately prior to *Dance of the Seven Veils*, had directed *Women in Love* (1969) which opened in cinemas to both good critical reviews and

impressive box-office returns. *Dance of the Seven Veils* was, therefore, regarded as something of a prestige production that was to be made, in colour, on an enhanced budget (that had been approved in advance by the Controller of BBC-1) and shown as a 'special' by *Omnibus*, the arts series that had succeeded *Monitor*. Although a screenplay by Henry Reed was commissioned, this was rejected by Russell on the grounds that it contained 'too much dialogue and too little music'.²⁵ He then prepared his own five-page treatment, dividing Strauss's life into seven sections based on the idea of the 'seven veils': 'The Superman', 'A Heroes (sic) Life', 'Domestic Symphony', 'Heroines', 'Great War', 'The Nazis' and 'Peace'. As this does not appear to have been turned into a written script, it was on the basis of this treatment that the film proceeded into production (in a further indication, perhaps, of the confidence that the BBC then placed in Russell and the latitude that they were prepared to extend to him). As had been the case on all his BBC productions since *The Debussy Film*, Russell also acted as both producer and director and the shooting of the film took place with relatively little interference (though Norman Swallow, who had been a champion of Russell's work since the beginning of his BBC career, acted as executive producer on behalf of *Omnibus*).

The first indication that the film might prove particularly contentious appears to have been in an interview that Russell himself gave to *The Times* (12 July 1969), while he was still filming, in which he announced that the film would be a 'biography to end all biographies' and claimed that Strauss had 'put up with the Nazis and ignored the persecution of the Jews'. This led Dr. E. Roth, the Chairman of the company - Boosey and Hawkes - that represented the Strauss family and owned the copyright to Strauss's music, to write to the BBC about the matter, asking for the finished film to be 'carefully vetted' in order to avoid 'misrepresenting the composer's character'.²⁶ This gave rise to concerns within the BBC that the film might be in breach of its PRS licence and that they would be unable to make use of certain musical extracts (particularly from the operas) without the consent of the copyright owners. Russell himself then added further fuel to the fire by indicating, in another

interview, that the film might be prevented from being shown and suggesting that 'the BBC should put it out silent with captions explaining why' (*Sunday Times*, 9 November 1969). Although the BBC rejected any suggestions of 'censorship', they did, nonetheless, seek to reassure Roth that the programme would not harm Strauss's reputation, arguing that Russell's films should not be 'judged as straight documentaries, but rather as artistic interpretations designed to express the truth of one artist as seen by another'.²⁷ They also invited him to a screening of the film after which he seemed prepared to end his opposition to the broadcast provided there were some corrections of fact and a clearer statement that 'the film is neither biographical nor documentary but a fantasy which takes its cue from general facts but deals freely with them'.²⁸ It is mainly for this reason that, when the film was eventually transmitted, it was preceded by an announcement warning the viewer that the film had been described as 'a harsh, sometimes violent caricature of the life of the composer, Richard Strauss' and consisted of 'a personal interpretation by Ken Russell of certain real and many imaginary events in the composer's life'.

While concerns about the tensions between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', and the 'factual' and the 'interpretative', in Russell's work were hardly new, they reached a new level of intensity in relation to *Dance of the Seven Veils*. In line with a trend partly initiated by *The Debussy Film*, Russell had declared his wish to abandon 'the reverential treatment of musical heroes' (which he associated with *Elgar*) and sought to offer a clear criticism of what he regarded as Strauss's political and moral failings (*Sunday Times*, 9 November 1969). He also appeared keen to abandon the 'austere' and 'restrained' style that had been a feature of his previous BBC film, *Song of Summer*, by taking 'the keynote of the film from the music, a lot of which is bombastic' (Phillips 1970). This led him to adopt what the film's titles refer to as a 'comic strip' approach to Strauss's life in which the pursuit of both documentary 'reconstruction' and realistic representation is more or less completely abandoned in favour of pastiche, lampoonery, visual excess and dramatic exaggeration (or 'bombast'). This means that, within the film, there is little of what might be regarded

as conventional biographical material (and Strauss himself, who was born in 1864, is played throughout – in a self-consciously histrionic performance – by a notably boyish Christopher Gable). Thus, while there are some scenes loosely based on Strauss's life these consist primarily of 'imaginary events' that are designed either to poke fun at Strauss's egotism and 'superman' pretensions (battling the critics to the accompaniment of 'Hero's Life' or making love to his wife during a performance of his 'Domestic Symphony') or to expose his complicity with the Nazis (conducting the music for the film version of 'Rosenkavalier' while a Jewish couple are attacked by Nazis in the audience or engaging in horseplay with Hitler at his villa in Garmisch). Other scenes, composed entirely of fantasy, are used to reinforce the film's critique of Strauss's self-serving arrogance by imagining him in the roles of his musical 'heroes' (Zarathustra, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Macbeth) or engaging in – somewhat salacious - encounters with his musical 'heroines' (Salome, Potiphar's Wife and Elektra). As befits its 'comic-strip' aesthetic, the style of the film also turns its back on conventional realism and makes extensive use of inter-textual allusions that range from Fritz Lang (in the Zarathustra sequence) and Von Stroheim (in the Don Juan sequence) to *Fantasia* (the composer's rise to the podium at the beginning and end of the film) and *The Sound of Music* (the 'Alpine Symphony' sequence). To this extent, the film may be seen to conform to what Joseph Gomez has identified as an ongoing shift in Russell's work away from 'literal and historical meaning' towards a 'definition of "truth"' rooted in a 'psychological, symbolic and/or metaphorical context' (1975: 48).

The film, however, does not entirely renounce its documentary status - or concern with historical referentiality - insofar as it also makes use of Strauss's own words on the soundtrack. Indeed, Russell claimed that virtually all of the spoken words in the film belonged to Strauss and went so far as to give Strauss a credit (along with Henry Reed and himself) for 'scenario and dialogue' at the film's close as a way of pre-empting criticisms that he had simply made it all up (*Radio Times*, 12 February 1970: 6). Given the extent of the film's reliance upon dramatic exaggeration

and burlesque, however, there was little likelihood that viewers would have been led to believe that they were witnessing reconstructions of actual historical events.²⁹ Nevertheless, because of the film's residual documentary elements and its clear reference to a real historical figure, upon whom a historical judgement was being passed, it was hardly surprising that the film's treatment of Strauss should prove controversial. This was certainly evident in some of the reactions to the film that objected to its 'unfairness' to Strauss and the 'desecration' of the composer's music. There were also complaints, familiar from the critical responses to *The Debussy Film*, that *Dance of the Seven Veils* revealed much more about Russell himself, and his own obsessions, than it did about its ostensible subject-matter, the life of Richard Strauss (*New Statesman*, 27 July 1970). However, while an anxiety about the film's rather extravagant intermingling of 'fact' and fiction' ran through the responses to the programme, it was also the provocative nature of the programme's scenes of sex and violence - such as the orgiastic attack on Zarathustra by nuns, Strauss's seduction by Potiphar's wife, the rape of Strauss's wife during the First World War and the carving of the Star of David onto the chest of a Jewish cinema-goer - that generated particular outrage. As one TV reviewer was to put it, '[t]he sight of nuns in sexual frenzy, a glimpse of the brutal soldiery engrossed in rape, the slaughter of a child and a touch of blood sacrifice' had the effect of making the programme seem 'crude, tasteless, even cheap' (*Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1978).

Criticisms such as these gained added momentum as result of the intervention of Mary Whitehouse, of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, who argued that the film had simply made use of Strauss's life as 'an excuse to get scenes of sex and violence on TV' (*The Sun*, 17 February 1970). Arguing that the film constituted 'outrageous pornography', she also threatened to sue the Post Office whom she held to be ultimately responsible for the programme's transmission (*Daily Mail*, 17 February 1970). A number of Conservative Members of Parliament also placed a motion before the House of Commons deploring the programme's 'viciousness, savagery and brutality' and calling upon the Minister of

Posts and Telecommunications to institute an inquiry into who was responsible for it.³⁰ This, in turn, led to the organisation of a special screening of the film for MPs attended by Huw Wheldon, now Television Managing Director at the BBC, and David Attenborough, the Director of Television Programmes. A screening was also arranged for the BBC's General Advisory Council at which the Conservative MP, David Gibson-Watt, objected to the film's scenes of 'rape, self-flagellation, violence and hatred' and argued that the programme had 'transgressed the limits which should be set by a national broadcasting corporation'.³¹

In the light of such negative attacks, there was, as might be expected, a considerable degree of debate within the BBC about both the merits (or otherwise) of the programme and how it had come to be made and shown. At the meeting of the Weekly Programme Review Group that followed the film's transmission, a number of concerns were raised, particularly by those engaged in factual programming. David Webster, the Executive Editor of the Television Current Affairs Group, complained that it had provided 'another instance of blurring the lines between fact and fiction' which had made its occupancy of 'the area of historical judgement' particularly problematic. Stephen Hearst, the Head of Arts Features, suggested that Russell had taken 'a much too simplistic and arrogant view of history' that had placed 'sensibility rather than sense in the saddle' while Aubrey Singer, the Head of the Features Group, condemned it as a 'a brilliant, well-illustrated, travesty' that he believed the BBC would not have shown had it been made 'by anyone other than Russell'. David Attenborough expressed the view that the labelling of the film as a 'comic strip' had helped to deflect this kind of criticism but also insisted that the programme was 'a work of astonishing invention and substantial creative imagination' that had deserved to be broadcast.³² It was, in fact, Attenborough who, as Director of Television Programmes, had taken the original decision to permit the programme to be shown after it had been 'referred upwards' to him. Although he had taken the precaution of issuing an 'early warning report', in which he indicated that the film's 'violent war scenes' and 'erotic sequences' were likely to generate

'widespread comment', he had, nevertheless, concluded that it was 'a most remarkable and accomplished film' that was worthy of transmission.³³

While he described the decision on whether or not to screen the programme as 'agonising', Attenborough also defended his judgement at a meeting of the BBC's Board of Management. At the same meeting, Wheldon accepted that the description of the film as a 'comic strip' had 'somewhat blunted any criticism on the unfairness to Strauss' but still worried that 'Russell had abused the freedom of television to indulge his fantasies of eroticism and violence'. He did, nonetheless, agree that it had been right for the film to be shown. The Director-General, Charles Curran, also spoke of his anxiety about the 'character-assassination' to which Strauss had been subjected but felt that 'the eroticism and violence' had been 'just about' 'permissible' and that, given the brilliance of the programme, 'he would have no qualms about defending the decision to screen it'.³⁴ The matter was discussed further at a meeting of the Board of Governors for whom a special screening of the film was organised. Curran maintained his stance that it was right to have shown the film but now referred to it as 'a "black" work of art' that raised questions about 'the desirability of treating biographies impressionistically' and 'the acceptability of a programme conceived entirely in hatred of its subject'. The Chairman of the Governors, Lord Hill, went further, not only complaining of the film's 'historical inaccuracy' but also adopting the view that it 'went beyond... the bounds of transmittability'. Attenborough's detailed explanation of why he had chosen to show the film does, however, appear to have satisfied the Governors that the decision had been arrived at in an appropriate manner. Attenborough, nevertheless, also took care to reassure the meeting that 'the limits reached' in the film would not be available to other directors and that Russell himself would not be 'allowed freely to go to the same limits again'. 'In no sense,' he concluded, 'would he allow the film to be regarded as a norm'.³⁵

Although Paul Sutton (2009: 22) has suggested that the BBC 'disowned' the film, this was hardly the case. While Attenborough admitted that, had the BBC not

commissioned the programme, he would probably not have wished to purchase it for transmission, he did nevertheless stand by his decision that the programme should be broadcast. He also refused to give any assurance that the film would not be repeated despite the pressures to do so from the Strauss estate. '[I]f we did give such an assurance', he explained, 'it would be tantamount to saying that we should not have put it on in the first place'.³⁶ The programme was also publicly supported by Wheldon and, despite his deep reservations about the film, the Chairman Lord Hill put his name to a letter, sent in response to letters of complaint from viewers, in which he expressed regret for the offence caused but stating that it would have been 'wrong' to take the 'course of suppressing the film'.³⁷ This did not mean, of course, that there was any great enthusiasm for the film within the BBC (although a number did admire it). As the discussion at the Board of Governors reveals, there was a strong sense that Russell's 'new form of television biography' had been taken about as far as it was 'permissible' to go and, therefore, amounted to an 'experiment' that should not be repeated either by Russell or by others. Russell had, by this time, committed himself to further work for the cinema. However, should he have wished to continue to work for the BBC, it was clear that, whatever his standing, he was unlikely to be accorded the same degree of freedom that he had enjoyed during the making of *Dance of the Seven Veils*.

Conclusion

The article began with a brief comparison between the BBC careers of Ken Loach and Ken Russell. In Loach's case, his introduction into drama of elements associated with documentary fuelled arguments about the mixing of 'fact' and 'fiction' and the responsibility of the BBC, as a national broadcaster, not to 'deceive' the viewer. As Loach's work grew more politically radical, this argument also became one about impartiality and 'balance' and the legitimacy of expressing views that fell outside the socio-political 'consensus' (Hill 2011). Russell's career may be seen to have followed

something of a similar trajectory. His importation into documentary of elements associated with drama also generated debates about the mixing of fact and fiction that led, in turn, to further arguments about 'balance' and 'fairness' in the films' treatment of the lives of their subjects. As his work increasingly shifted away from evidence-based 'reconstruction' towards subjective interpretation and fantasy, this also provoked increasing concerns about the legitimacy of showing certain kinds of representation of sex and violence (rather than, as in Loach's case, the legitimacy of presenting a revolutionary political viewpoint). During the 1960s, the BBC had, of course, proved something of a battle-ground for those (such as National Viewers' and Listeners' Association) opposed to the increasing liberalisation and secularisation of British society and what was perceived to be a decline in standards of decency and taste. Indeed, in a document, sponsored by the Chairman of the Board of Governors and published in 1968, the BBC had identified how it was faced with divisions in 'moral attitudes' within British society that meant it was called upon to balance the freedom of the 'creative artist' (to whom the BBC provided patronage) with an 'obligation to the public' not to 'wilfully or unnecessarily... depart from a standard of good taste'.³⁸ *Dance of the Seven Veils* was clearly a work that challenged such a balance. In his defence of *Dance of the Seven Veils*, Norman Swallow argued that it was the obligation of the BBC to support 'experiment' and be prepared to risk 'public outcry'.³⁹ However, in this case, the extent of the departure from what the BBC took to constitute both 'impartiality' and 'good taste' was so great that *Dance of the Seven Veils* had in effect reached the limits of what the BBC considered itself in a position to broadcast at this time.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Trish Hayes of the BBC Written Archives Centre, Kevin Flanagan, Ian Greaves, Dave King and Paul Sutton for their help with the research for this article. My thanks also to the AHRC for their support for the 'The History of Forgotten

Television Drama' research project, based in the Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London.

References

Armes, Roy (1978), *A Critical History of British Cinema*, London: Secker & Warburg.

Bakewell, Joan and Garnham, Nicholas (eds) (1970), *The New Priesthood: British Television Today*, London: Allen Lane.

Baxter, John (1973), *An Appalling Talent: Ken Russell*, London: Michael Joseph.

BBC (1972), *Principles and Practice in Documentary Programmes*, BBC: London.

Cook, John R. (2010), "'Don't forget to look into the camera!': Peter Watkins' approach to acting with facts", *Studies in Documentary*, 4:3, pp. 227-240.

Dickinson, Kay (2007), "'The very new can only come from the very old": Ken Russell, national culture and the possibility of experimental television at the BBC in the 1960s', in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds), *Experimental British Television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 70-88..

Ellis, John (2005), 'Documentary and truth on television: The crisis of 1999' in Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (eds), *New Challenges for Documentary*, 2nd edition, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.342-60.

Ferris, Paul (1990), *Sir Huge: The Life of Huw Wheldon*, London: Michael Joseph.

Gardiner, John (2003), 'Variations on a theme of Elgar: Ken Russell, the Great War, and the television "life" of a composer', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 23: 3, pp. 195-209.

Gomez, Joseph A. (1975), "'Mahler" and the methods of Ken Russell's films on composers"', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 14, pp. 45-50.

Hill, John (2011), *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, London: BFI.

Phillips, Gene D. (1970), 'A blast from the past: An interview with Ken Russell', <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-blast-from-the-past-an-interview-with-ken-russell>.

Russell, Ken (1989), *A British Picture: An Autobiography*, London: Heinemann.

Russell, Ken (1993), *Fire Over England: The British Cinema Comes Under Friendly Fire*, London: Hutchinson.

Sutton, Paul (2009), 'Ken Russell at the BBC, 1959-70', in Kevin M. Flanagan (ed.), *Ken Russell: Re-viewing England's Last Mannerist*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, pp. 3-23.

Sutton, Paul (2012), *Becoming Ken Russell: The Authorised Biography of Ken Russell, Volume One*, Cambridge: Bear Claw Publishing.

Swallow, Norman (1966), *Factual Television*, London: Focal Press.

Tibbetts, John C. (2005), 'Elgar's ear: Ken Russell talks about his composer biopics', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 22:1, pp. 37-49.

Van Eecke, Christophe (2013), 'Refusing to lie down: Truth, fiction and Ken Russell's early television documentaries', *Photogenie*, 1, http://www.photogenie.be/photogenie_blog/article/d-refusing-lie-down.

¹ In his article Van Eecke argues that scholars of television drama have unjustly neglected Russell's work and I am grateful to him for encouraging me to develop my own thinking about the fusion of drama and documentary in Russell's work. Russell did, in fact, direct a television play, *The Diary of a Nobody* (BBC2 12 December 1964), for the BBC in 1964 and this is now even less well known than many of his documentaries.

² In a subsequent memo on the subject, Wheldon also argued that the same principles of 'thorough research', 'labelling' and 'clearly defined intention' applied to 'dramatised documentary' and 'documentary type drama'. See 'Principles and Practice in Documentary Programmes Note by Managing Director, Television', General Advisory Council, 13 March 1973, BBCWAC R78/2623/1.

³ Fox was also the author of a piece that appeared in the *Radio Times* (16 January 1969: 4). under the title 'Keeping Faith with the Viewer' in which he argued that the mixing of drama and documentary was likely to lead to 'confusion in the mind of the viewer'.

⁴ Following her retirement, Wyndham Goldie also got drawn into the arguments about Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (BBC1 16 November 1966) which she attacked for deliberately blurring 'the distinction between fact and fiction' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 8 January 1967).

⁵ Given such concerns, it might be thought that Peter Watkins' *Culloden* (BBC1 15 December 1964), which was made as a documentary but relies extensively on costumed actors (albeit non-professionals), would have run into more difficulties than it appears to have done. However, although it was recognised within the BBC that the film constituted a departure from the documentary norm, it was still regarded, and labelled, as a documentary 'reconstruction' rather than as a drama. Thus, in his introduction to the programme for the *Radio Times* (10 December 1964: 31), Huw Wheldon was at pains to stress that the programme's innovations operated within 'definite limits'. 'The stubborn facts, fully documented', he argued, had remained 'sovereign'. Events had been 'carefully reconstructed' and there was 'virtually no "dramatic dialogue" of the kind used in many an historical narrative'. For a fuller discussion of Watkins' approach to 'docudrama', see Cook (2010).

⁶ Letter from Humphrey Burton to John Ardagh, *Observer*, 13 June 1961, BBCWAC T32/1001/1.

⁷ Wheldon indicated that he also objected to Russell 'faking some film to look like newsreel footage' (Baxter 1973: 123). However, as various commentators have noted, this concern sat rather oddly with the decision to use extracts from Eisenstein's *October* (1927) to illustrate the Russian Revolution given that these themselves involved dramatic reconstruction.

⁸ Memo from Norman Swallow to HMPTel, 1 June 1959; Memo from Head of Music Productions, Television to A.H. Films Tel., 2 June 1959, BBCWAC T32/1033/2.

⁹ Memo from Monitor Office to the *Listener*, 9 November 1962, BBCWAC T32/1033/2.

¹⁰ When he read Russell's initial treatment, the Head of Music, Lionel Salter, had complained that this type of incident constituted 'gossip-column stuff' (BBCWAC T32/1033/2). Kay Dickinson has, however, interpreted the introduction of such 'titbits of mundane everyday life' as a move towards 'a more democratic take on history' that was in line with more general democratising trends during the 1960s (and, it might be said, Russell's own 'pop art' blending of high art and mass culture) (2007: 73).

¹¹ Wheldon claimed that this sequence was cut in half at his insistence on the grounds that Russell was speaking illegitimately on Elgar's behalf (Baxter: 122).

¹² The film, in this respect, might be said to possess parallels with Russell's first film to deal with a composer, *Gordon Jacob* (BBC 29 March 1959), in which the music of the composer is firmly linked to the location – the New Forest and surrounding countryside – where Jacob was living.

¹³ Memo from Anne James, *Monitor*, to Publicity, 4 May 1964, BBCWAC T32/1072/1; *Radio Times*, 21 May 1964, 18.

¹⁴ Publicity material, 24 May 1964, BBCWAC T53/115/1.

¹⁵ Letter from Ken Russell to Madame de Tinan, n.d. (1965), BBCWAC T32/1095/2. The BBC were, however, unable to convince Madame de Tinan of the merits of the film which meant that, as the holder of the musical copyright, she was able to prevent the programme being screened outside the UK. This is one of a number of problems with musical copyright to have restricted the availability of Russell's TV work, including, as will be seen, *Dance of the Seven Veils*.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Television Weekly Programme Review Group, 18 May 1965. At the same meeting, Huw Wheldon observed that 'Russell always had to restrain himself enormously to keep close to his subject'.

¹⁷ Transcript of *The Critics*, BBCWAC T32/1095/1. Although the transcript is undated, the programme appears to have been broadcast on the Home Service on 23 May 1965.

¹⁸ Memo from Assistant Head of Talks (General), Television to H.T.C.A.Tel., 14 August 1962, BBCWAC T32/1033/2.

¹⁹ Wheldon wrote to Russell in September 1964 about 'overshooting and overspending on a big rate' while the Controller of BBC1, Michael Peacock, called upon the Assistant Head of Documentary, Richard Cawston, to explain why the cost of the project had risen so much above its original budget (BBCWAC T32/1095/3). The BBC management's issues with overspending appear, in part, to have increased as a result of Russell becoming his own producer.

²⁰ Indeed, when the Head of Television Music and Arts Programmes, Humphrey Burton, was setting up this particular project, he was able to secure a higher than normal budget on the grounds that Russell possessed 'the greatest reputation of any film director still working in the Corporation'. Memo from Head of Music and Arts Programmes, Television to C. BBC-1, 11 August 1966, BBCWAC T53/99/2.

²¹ Minutes of the Television Weekly Programme Review Group, 3 January 1968.

²² Audience Research Report, 25 June 1964, BBCWAC T35/115/1.

²³ Audience Research Report, 4 June 1965, BBCWAC T32/1095/3.

²⁴ Partly due to fears of legal action, the Head of Music, John Culshaw, had written to the Controller of Programmes, Huw Wheldon, to reassure him that he had 'no reason to believe that Russell's treatment will be in any serious sense provocative' even though it would be 'dramatic' and 'concern itself with the somewhat disagreeable manner of Delius's death' (due to syphilis). Memo, 5 April 1968, BBCWAC T53/118/3.

²⁵ Letter from Ken Russell to Henry Reed, 20 March 1969, BBCWAC T53/159/2.

²⁶ Letter from Dr. E. Roth to Mr. R. Walford, Copyright Department, 21 July 1969, BBCWAC T53/159/4.

²⁷ Letter from R.G. Walford, Head of Copyright, to Dr. Roth, 29 July 1969, BBCWAC T53/159/4.

²⁸ Letter from E. Roth to J. Culshaw, 5 November 1969, BBCWAC T53/159/4.

²⁹ The research undertaken into audience reaction to the programme suggested that viewers were divided in their responses. Some viewers were positive about Russell's 'very subjective view of Richard Strauss' and appreciated the film's portrait of a 'stylised' Strauss and its use of 'fantastic' settings. Others, however, disliked what they took to be a 'distorted' picture of Strauss and complained of the film's lack of 'good taste'. 'Omnibus: Dance of the Seven Veils', Audience Research Report, 3 March 1970, BBCWAC T53/159/1.

³⁰ Extract from Notices of Questions and Motions, House of Commons, 18 February 1970, BBCWAC R78/2658/1.

³¹ Minutes of the Meeting of the General Advisory Council, 22 April 1970, BBCWAC R78/2658/1.

³² Minutes of the TV Weekly Programme Review Meeting, 18 February 1970, BBCWAC T62/5/1.

³³ Memo from Director of Programmes, Television to D.P.A, 28 January 1970, BBCWAC R78/2658/1.

³⁴ Minutes of the Board of Management, 16 February 1970, BBCWAC R2/23/1. Curran was partly responding to William Mann's complaints in the *Times* (16 February 1970) that the film was 'all fantasy, but about Ken Russell, not about Strauss'.

³⁵ Meeting of the Board of Governors, 26 February 1970, BBCWAC R1/38/1. In his written account of his decision, prepared for this meeting of the Board of Governors, Attenborough indicated the elements that he had believed would provoke concern: 'the attack on Strauss' (and the film's identification of him with 'unbridled sensuality', the 'propagation of Nietzschean philosophy' and 'involvement with the Nazis') along with the scenes involving 'overt sexuality' and representations of 'extreme violence'. It was, however, his conclusion that these could be justified on both historical and artistic grounds. 'Dance of the Seven Veils': film on Richard Strauss by Ken Russell. A summary of the argument made at Board of Governors. A note by D.P.Tel., 27 February 1970, BBCWAC T53/159/4.

³⁶ Memo from Director of Programmes, Television, to H.M.P.Tel., 1 April 1970, BBCWAC T53/159/4. Although Roth, of Boosey and Hawkes, had seen the original film before transmission he was clearly upset by the controversy that the film's screening had created and sought assurances that the film would be 'buried in the archives'. Because of the

difficulties a quarrel with the Strauss estate might create for the use of Strauss's music in other programmes, R. G. Walford, Head of Copyright, and John Culshaw, Head of Music Programmes, were prepared to offer Roth a stronger assurance than Attenborough who only agreed to say that there was 'no present intention' to repeat the programme. So, while there would have been little enthusiasm within the BBC for a repeat screening, the fact that the programme has not been screened on the BBC since its original transmission appears to be the result of a continuing dispute over copyright rather than a direct BBC ban.

³⁷ Hill of Luton, 'Dance of the Seven Veils', BBCWAC T53/159/4. It was not uncommon for the BBC management during this period to be forced to calculate whether the suppression of a programme, even when it was disliked, was liable to prove more controversial than allowing it to be shown.

³⁸ 'Broadcasting and the Public Mood: A Note by the Governors', BBCWAC R78/2503/1.

³⁹ Norman Swallow, 'In the Shadow of the Seven Veils', 22 February 1970, BBCWAC T53/159/4.

John Hill is Professor of Media at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–63* (1986), *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999); *Cinema and Northern Ireland* (2006) and *Ken Loach: the Politics of Film and Television* (2011), the co-author of *Cinema and Ireland* (1987) and the editor or co-editor of a number of books and journals including *Big Picture, Small Screen: the Relations between Film and Television* (1996) and *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (1998).