

2-10-2014

## Savage Messiah: Ken Russell's Forgotten Masterpiece

John A. Duvall

*Department of Communication and Media Studies, Dominican University of California,*  
duvalljohnallen@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.646576>

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Duvall, John A., "Savage Messiah: Ken Russell's Forgotten Masterpiece" (2014). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 74.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.646576>

### DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.646576>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

*Savage Messiah*

*Ken Russell's Forgotten Masterpiece*

John A. Duvall, PhD  
Associate Professor of Communications  
Dominican University of California

September, 2011

## **Savage Messiah: Ken Russell's Forgotten Masterpiece**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of *Savage Messiah*, Ken Russell's filmic biography of WWI-era artist and sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, evaluating its various aesthetic codes of meaning, and demonstrating how these codes contribute to a unified narrative structure. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenological elements of the cinematic narrative – image composition, art direction, color, motion, editing and sound – in order to reveal the sensuous core of the film as its method of thematic expression. We offer observations on the narrative's deep structure in terms of symbolic references, on Russell's visual techniques of characterization, and on how these elements contribute to the integration of the film's aesthetic, emotional and intellectual expression.

Keywords: Ken Russell, *Savage Messiah*, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska

### *Savage Messiah: Ken Russell's Forgotten Masterpiece*

Director Ken Russell has variously referred to his 1973 film *Savage Messiah* as a masterpiece, the best script he ever filmed, and one of the best collections of performances he ever directed (Fisher, 2000; Russell, 2001: 20). The film is simultaneously a portrait of an artist coming of age, an offbeat love story, and a powerful statement on the cost of war. But one thing is certain: few people among the current generation of film aficionados have ever viewed it. *Savage Messiah* played in theaters for only one week in its original 1972 release, and as of 2011 it is still not available on DVD. Yet some Russell scholars believe it may represent the consummate work in a long and controversial career (Hanke 1984: 218).

Based on the book of the same name by J.S. Ede (1931), *Savage Messiah* chronicles the brief life and career of little known French artist and sculptor Henri Gaudier, viewed principally through the prism of his Platonic love affair with his partner Sophie Brzeska, with whom he shared names. It is without a doubt Russell's most personal statement as an auteur, reflecting his own views on art and the artistic life.

Russell first encountered Ede's book during a period of recovery following what he called a nervous breakdown, following a series of false career starts in the Merchant Marine, the Royal Air Force, and as a failed dancer and actor (Baxter, 1973: 15). Gaudier-Brzeska's incredible artistic productivity during his brief life, in the face of poverty and hardship, served as an inspiration for Russell at the beginning of his career in film, and helped give him the confidence to carry on (Hanke, 1984: 180; Phillips, 1979: 112; Russell 1991: 87). He had always been interested in adapting the book to film, and when the rights became available in 1971, Russell grabbed them up immediately.

It was a pivotal moment in Russell's career. After enjoying a decade of success producing documentaries and biographical dramatizations for BBC television, Russell had directed three successful, daring feature films: *Women in Love* (1969), an adaptation of the D. H. Lawrence novel, for which Glenda Jackson won a Best Actress Oscar and Russell earned a nomination for Best Director; *The Music Lovers* (1971), a biography of the composer Tchaikovsky that dramatized his struggles with homosexuality and his disastrous marriage; and *The Devils* (1971), a tale of religious fanaticism and political corruption in France based on a book by Aldous Huxley. All three films involved provocative and controversial nude scenes, and portrayed characters in self-destructive sexual relationships. Collectively they established Russell as the pre-eminent (or at least the most notorious) British film director of the decade, a figure who stimulated much controversy as well as admiration from both audiences and critics.

However, Russell suffered his first major directorial setback with *The Boy Friend* (1971), adapted from a theatrical musical, which proved a failure both with critics and at the box office. Russell's response was to fall back on the genre most familiar to him - the artist's biography - and to produce it with a small budget and crew, similar to his days back with the BBC. *Savage Messiah* provided the perfect vehicle for this effort. In order to have total artistic freedom, Russell raised the financing for the film entirely by himself, to a large extent from his own resources by mortgaging his large home – a risky strategy that left him open to financial ruin (Russell 1991:88).

In terms of theme or genre, *Savage Messiah* may be viewed from several different points of view. As indicated by its sub-title – “the story of a young French art student and the lonely Polish woman he met in Paris before the First World War” – the core of

the film is the unconventional love story between the young Gaudier and the older Brzeska, a partnership that was Platonic but very passionate, and survived many challenges of poverty and separation (Gomez, 1976-2: 70; Hanke, 1984: 181). The film is a classical “portrait of the artist as a young man,” showing how Gaudier developed his skills and self-confidence despite incredible obstacles, and arose to become a recognized self-made genius. Often in the film Russell contrasts two aspects of the struggles of the artist: the striving for perfection in the realization of an ideal on the one hand, and the inevitable opportunistic concessions to survival on the other.

*Savage Messiah* also serves as a vehicle for director Russell to voice many of his own opinions about art and the demands of the artistic life, views that he shares deeply with Gaudier. Finally, the outcome of the film, ending with Gaudier’s death in the trenches of World War I, delivers an emotional message about the destructive waste of war, served up to its audience while the war in Vietnam still raged (Hanke, 1984: 218).

The script for *Savage Messiah* was adapted from Ede’s book by Christopher Logue, whom Russell knew as a poet and actor; ironically, this was one of the few scripts Russell directed on which he did not at least share screenwriting credit. The bulk of the book was drawn from letters written by Gaudier to Sophie, which in part explains the centrality of their relationship in the film’s narrative. To crew this small budget production Russell relied on his stable of regulars, among them production designer Derek Jarman, costume designer Shirley Russell (Ken’s wife), and editor Michael Bradsell. For director of photography Russell chose Dick Bush, with whom he had worked on several BBC productions. The goal was to film this “chamber piece” quick and dirty, like a BBC television production with a family feeling among the actors and

crew, and it worked to perfection (Baxter, 1973: 56; Gomez, 1976-1: 166; Phillips, 1979: 113). Despite the limits of resources and time during production, the pace of the dialogue, the movement of the camera and the often jolting editing gives the film a dynamism and vibrancy beyond its budget (Lanza, 2007: 137)

The requirements of the lead roles, as well as the low budget, demanded that Russell reach outside of his coterie of familiar actors for casting Henri and Sophie (Baxter, 1973: 50). For Sophie he chose Dorothy Tutin, who had a distinguished career in the London theatrical world for 20 years, but had been little seen on screen. For Henri, Russell cast a newcomer, Scott Antony, who made his screen debut in *Savage Messiah*. Both delivered extraordinary performances. Tutin could well have merited Academy Award consideration, had enough reviewers seen the film, and Antony is amazingly persuasive for a novice, a great testimony to Russell's "hands-off" style of directing actors.

As a director, Russell had become known for what many critics regarded as "excessive" dramatic techniques – over-elaborate camera moves, startling cuts, subjective interpretations of characters' imaginations, distortion of historical events – in general, attempting to force his intense visions onto the audience with a complete lack of subtlety. In this regard, *Savage Messiah* was a noticeable step back towards realism for Russell. While the film does contain some of his signature techniques – such as intentional jump cuts, fast-paced dialogue, intense relationships, and his favored themes of sex and death – Russell stays away from subjective fantasies and dreams, and tells this story through a more conventional narrative style (Hanke, 1984: 179). The camera's point of view is

basically objective, in terms of not making the audience look at the action from any character's perspective, or identify too intensely with any particular character.

The handsome young Frenchman Henri Gaudier first meets his partner-to-be Sophie Brzeska in a library in Paris early in the twentieth century. After forcing a stranger to surrender her usual seat to her, she meticulously sets her place for writing. She is fortyish, gaunt, ornery but lively. Gaudier watches her with amusement, then fashions an origami bird and offers it to her, striking up a conversation. Close-ups zero in on Henri and Sophie individually at first, then widen out to two-shots. Despite their contrasting personalities, their loneliness is clearly a factor drawing them to each other (Phillips, 1979: 117). The library setting, with its regimented organization, rectangular visual lines and enforced silence, establishes a pattern of using interior space as an oppressive enforcer of isolation and conformity against the boisterous and rebellious artistic temperament.

In the following scene, Henri and Sophie walk through a public garden, where Henri climbs upon the nude statues adorning a fountain and satirically harangues the crowd on the evils of art, until the police chase him off – the first of many rejections by official society that he will suffer for his art (Hanke, 1984: 182). Henri's climb up onto the fountain, looking down upon the crowd, establishes his pattern of upward movement, in contrast to Sophie's position below at the edge of the fountain. A quick zoom in on her emphasizes Sophie's insecurity in the crowd. Russell's use of jump cuts - discontinuous shifts in time and space, such as Henri's ascent onto the fountain – departs from the conventional illusion of continuity editing, reinforcing Gaudier's equally self-conscious musings about art, sex and revolution.

Henri's flamboyant speech about art announces the film's primary conceit – “Russell's philosophic discourse on art and the artist” (Hanke, 1984: 199; Gomez, 1976-1: 171) – engaging the viewer on an intellectual level while keeping the pace moving quickly. Much of Russell's work demonstrates his belief that the more intellectual the content of a scene, the more outlandish must be its visual and temporal representation. This sequence establishes Henri and Sophie as principal characters and marks the character contrasts between them, in terms of age, appearance, and emotional and intellectual disposition. Henri is young, irreverent and full of exuberance. Sophie is rigid, suspicious and defensive, and filled with frustrated ambitions as a novelist.

Sophie invites him to her tiny apartment, preparing him dinner while he sketches her. The apartment is in a triangular attic, claustrophobic, leaving little room for heads, but affording the camera unusual perspectives from just about any angle. Yet the starkness and angularity is moderated by the redness of the oil lamp's light, which brings out the warm tones of the wooden walls as well as the faces. Sophie chops unrelentingly at her vegetables while delivering a long monologue, revealing her painful history of poverty, inadequacy and abuse at breakneck speed. Sophie's monologue is intensely poetic, crammed with colorful analogies, metaphors and striking turns of phrase. Russell's frequent use of rapid-fire dialogue allows him to cover the philosophical and psychological exposition that concerns him, without slowing down the pace or appearing too facile or preachy (Hanke, 1984: 179).

Sophie's close-up exemplifies how facial details (enhanced by make-up) can contribute mightily to a dramatic impression. Her thin eyebrows, closely cropped hair, thin lips, and lined face and hands give her a truly withered countenance, especially

compared to Henri's boyish complexion. The way she calls him "boy" throughout the film suggests that their Platonic affair fulfills certain maternal needs for her, while injecting a subtle incestuous element into the psychology of their chaste relationship. Despite his apparent confidence, Henri confesses his need for support in achieving his creative ambitions (Gomez, 1976-2: 71).

Henri and Sophie visit the Louvre museum and immediately encounter the wrath of officialdom for his sloppy dress and uncouth behavior. Henri climbs atop an Easter Island statue and rants against worshipping art to the museum guards, who mount a ladder to restrain him and summarily eject him into the street. Henri and Sophie suffer repeated persecution and rejection at the hands of uptight society (Gomez, 1976-2: 74). Russell views the artist as rebel - the creative individual invariably at odds with those who live their lives by following rules and regulations, whether those of religion, nation or even art (Gomez, 1976-1: 167). Another symbolic motif, often played for humor but with clear psychological significance, is Henri's association with phallic objects (e.g., the Easter Island statue), emphasizing both the power of his artistic creativity, as well as his sexual frustration with Sophie.

The museum is another geometrically well-ordered and socially oppressive space that enforces silence, similar to the library in the opening scene. Russell's use of very wide-angle lenses exaggerates the cavernous quality of the museum to the point of surrealism, curving the lines of the ceiling and distorting the height of the guard's ladder – a technique that distorts visual reality by exaggerating depth as well as enhancing the speed of motion. In this scene Russell again employs jump cuts and visual slight-of-hand

to get Henri atop the statue. But he carefully uses long takes and tracking shots to build up to his “shock cuts”, thus giving them added impact.

After departing Paris, Henri and Sophie ride by carriage with his mother and father to their country home. Proper Victorians, they install Sophie in an adjacent cottage rather than allowing her to stay in the main house near Henri, suffering upon her one more rejection. Undeterred, Henri visits her by night, but she says she prefers her solitude and sends him away.

As Henri enters an environment related to his past, images shift subtly to light pastels in the day sequences, and sepia tones resembling old photographs in the interiors. The scenes in Sophie’s cottage, which is cluttered with memorabilia, are so deeply sepia-toned that they resemble black and white more than color, more shades than hues. As in memory, the treatment of time becomes less rigidly defined here. Continuity sequences give way to lyrical montages punctuated by brief moments of dialogue. The audience cannot tell how long the “lovers” reside at the estate, but glimpse only the emotional highs and lows.

By day, in one of the film’s more poetic sequences, they enjoy many pleasures sitting among the fields and trees, he sketching and she reading. They read verse to each other and vow to share names. Then one day the local constable evicts Sophie from the cottage, based on a complaint that she is guilty of the “improper reception of men” – ironic, since she is completely innocent. First rejected by the high culture represented by the museum, then cast out from his old home, Henri throws a tantrum in Sophie’s defense and they depart, heading for London.

Russell's films often involve a protagonist's conflicted relationship with his or her parents. Henri's parents are puritanical, controlling, judgmental and emotionally distant. Their initially subtle and later overt rejection of Sophie extends that motif, and the lifeless environment in which they exist presents both Henri's rebelliousness and his artistic disposition in a new light. Russell's viewpoint is typically Freudian: art seems to arise from repression and sublimation of sexuality, due to unresolved parental conflicts, based on the parents' passive-aggressive pattern of superficial acceptance and implicit rejection.

Henri and Sophie set up a living space beneath the arch of a railway station in London. He teases her playfully about her sexual reluctance, but when he becomes too persistent, she gets angry and tells him to go find a whore. He asks her for the money and she gives him some. Henri wanders the red light district and engages an old whore. But when he returns in the early morning, he posts some new nude sketches on the wall and returns the money to Sophie. Their sexual struggle again moves to the foreground, and through sublimation of lust, art is the victor and Henri's commitment to Sophie is reaffirmed.

Though erotically distant, they are bound together in their exile from their native land and in their isolation from the social world outside. The feeling of claustrophobia and poverty is palpable in the production design – a “subterranean dwelling which combines the worst qualities of the factory, the prison cell and the sewer” (Hanke, 1984: 192). The flat has brick walls and an earthen floor. The low stone ceiling hovers just above their heads, reminding us of the limitations of their situation; the world is literally closing in on them.

The use of color in the basement flat reinforces the dominant emotion. The moonlight that shines down through the gratings is bluish, contrasting with the warmer reds that shine from the coal lamps and reflect off the brick walls. As Russell plays contrasting colors against each other, the struggle between joy and sorrow becomes a battle between red and blue tones. Also, lighting from the street shines down at oblique angles, creating unusual, slightly surreal shadows everywhere, often dividing faces into bluish cold and reddish warm tones: the dual nature of human emotion captured in visual terms.

Russell often uses sound to build the emotional pitch of sequences, but always in harmony with the realism of the setting. The roar of the train overhead always seems to coincide with highly charged emotional exchanges, forcing the characters to shout at each other even louder in order to be heard – a clever dramatic device, but consistent with the diegetic action in their impoverished abode.

Finally Henri lands a job, and his employer arranges for an art dealer/friend to visit their flat for dinner. Mr. Corky (played by choreographer Lindsay Kemp) arrives, a round-faced, distinctly effeminate man who immediately falls in love with Henri's sketches and offers to buy one. They sit down for dinner, which makes a much poorer impression on their guest. Corky admits he can't pay on the spot; Sophie is skeptical but Henri laughs it off. The lovers stage a mock fight, rolling around on the floor, and Corky, embarrassed, slips out the door unnoticed.

The specter of homosexuality often lurks in the background (and sometimes in the foreground) of the sexual conflicts in Russell's films, as the domain of those who cannot cope with heterosexual strife. The possibility hovers that Corky may have ulterior

motives for his interest in Henri, but the two men quickly develop a valuable friendship based on their dedication to art. Corky is a distinct departure for Russell, a sympathetic character who is not seeking association with an artist for mercenary or unbalanced psychological reasons.

Corky invites Henri and Sophie to dine with his friends from the artistic community – critics, dealers, and gadflies modeled after the Vorticist circle. The names of the characters in the film are fictionalized, but historically they represent members of the London avant-garde art world such as Middleton Murray and Katherine Mansfield. The dinner sequence opens with a long tracking shot of their faces - garishly made-up, each person with some absurd or pretentious remark – before we even get an establishing shot of the room. Here Russell works at his side-show best, digging the screw deeply into all he views as elitist, hypocritical and shallow: a montage of bizarre faces like so many caricatures from a deck of cards. Everyone is adorned in bold primary colors, reinforcing the outlandishness of their egos. An endless barrage of clichés and deprecatory slurs, the dialogue in the scene combines with the noisy clinking of glasses and plates to create an atmosphere of stifling snobbery and gluttony.

All the discussion is about politics and critical reviews, about which our newcomers know nothing, just as they are ignorant of the proper way to eat soup. Responding to questions about his work, Henri boasts of all sorts of things he has not really done. Sophie sings a crude folk song to everyone's consternation. Shaw, a prominent art dealer, offers to pay Henri a visit in the morning to see one of his sculptures (which does not actually exist).

Once again Henri and Sophie are excluded from conformist society, this time a clique at the heart of the commercial art world itself, but every bit as affected in its radicalism as Henri's native community was in its conservatism (Lanza, 2007: 138). Russell's political views seem to have an affinity for libertarian anarchism – he never seems to encounter an organized group that he regards with favor. This dinner scene foreshadows the increasingly political climate explicitly focusing on the possibility of war – a prediction that grows progressively more significant as the narrative develops. Although Henri loudly proclaims that he “loves war” because of its intensity, one cannot escape the impression that he is primarily attempting to offend his audience, since later in the film he expresses contempt for those who allow themselves to be led into slaughter by pompous generals and popular pressure.

After the dinner, with Sophie and Corky tagging along, Henri leads an expedition through a cemetery for a gravestone adequate for his artistic purposes. The search for the stone in the graveyard is a fine example of Russell's use of symbolism in harmony with narrative. On one hand, it is perfectly logical in terms of plot. But the image of Henri trekking among the graves implies much more; it represents the artist's rootedness in the past, paying homage to how one living man builds on the achievements of those who have gone before. It is also, of course, delightfully irreverent, grave-robbing being a criminal act. Russell admires the anarchic struggle of the artist as outlaw.

Back in his flat, Henri dons some goggles and begins chipping away. As his friends doze off, Henri talks to himself to stay awake, overflowing with ideas about art, work and life. This sculpting scene is the pivotal sequence in the film. The audience sees Gaudier-Brzeska the artist at work, totally involved and committed to his task. The

choice of a sculptor is perfect to serve Russell's purpose in demystifying art. Henri's genius is, in Edison's famous formula, one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration: hard, sweaty, physical labor. Yet the mystical effect remains: as Henri says, "A man must see what he wants in the stone before he opens the stone. And yet unless you let the stone influence you, unless you let it lead you in, you are lost." Corky's presence at this central event must be noted; with the celibate lover and his effeminate patron, Henri has in a sense two surrogate parents in attendance during his central creative act.

When the actors cannot move, Russell moves the camera. As Henri stands chiseling and sermonizing, the camera slowly dollies around him, viewing him from every possible angle. Just because there is so much talk and so little action, everything in these shots is designed to contribute to a visual dynamism. The angle of Henri's body contrasts with the lines in the brick ceiling; the camera begins at eye level and progressively lowers to more extreme angles. The dim lighting creates a strong sense of texture of the stone; the backlight makes the artist a towering figure, half in darkness, half in light: another clever merging of diagesis and metaphor.

Even as Henri seems to be speaking continuously, we see the sculpture materialize from shot to shot, beginning as a blank stone and ending up as a finished piece, through a series of invisible ellipses. The incessant tapping of the chisel on the stone sets the pace of Henri's monologue, driving it on with increasing force, echoing the rhythms of Sophie's chopping vegetables in the earlier sequence in her apartment. When Shaw fails to keep his morning appointment, Henri lugs the statue to his gallery and angrily heaves it through the window.

Unfortunately, their life in London is leaving Sophie ever more domesticated, doing the cooking and cleaning and no longer speaking of her writing, unhappy over her lot and annoyed by Henri's neglect. Frustrated, she announces her intention to leave for a while. After she departs, Henri takes Corky for a night on the town and encounters radical feminist Gosh Boyle (a young Helen Mirren in her second film) firebombing a public park. Later at the Vortex nightclub, portrayed as a center for avant-garde gatherings, Gosh slashes a poster of Goya's *Nude Maja* (apparently objecting to its sexism) and sings a ridiculous song promoting "votes for women" while Henri jeers leeringly from the audience. He jumps on stage and persuades her to start taking off her clothes while he sings a song. As a reward for their rowdiness, they are both tossed out of the club.

This sequence is perhaps the weakest in *Savage Messiah*. We are not given adequate foreshadowing of Sophie's thoughts about leaving (although potential reasons are obvious), nor a good sense of Henri's feelings or reactions about it. Instead the narrative temporarily loses its personal focus and becomes embroiled in obvious satire. Russell's ambivalent attitudes toward women are represented in his contrasting characterizations of Gosh and Sophie. Gosh is voluptuous and full of energy but her immature egotism and overt sexuality undermine the credibility of her convictions. She dives uncritically into any new cause, from suffrage to art to war. By contrast, Sophie's face is lined and drawn; she has been victimized by life, but retains her independence and integrity. However, neither sustains either her self-awareness or creative productivity.

Russell has little interest in dealing seriously with the theories of Vorticism or their meaning for Gaudier. The expressionist décor of the Vortex club, notably too hip

for the period, is an example of Russell's use of symbolic anachronism, a technique he downplays in *Savage Messiah* for the most part. The club's angular design is composed of strong primary colors, mostly the reds and blues we have come to identify with satirization of the chic elite, and reminiscent of the expressionist style of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Baxter, 1973: 87). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Corky's dinner guests all frequent the club.

Henri meets Sophie at the train station with a handful of flowers he drops on the tracks, barely avoiding being run over by the train. As a lover Henri is quite a klutz, but Sophie appreciates his gesture. But soon his affection fades, as he becomes impatient that she cannot keep up with him. In earlier tracking shots they moved along together, but now Henri constantly leaves Sophie behind or below him - she has begun to have trouble keeping pace with him. He is intent on walking to the sea, while she merely desires a room to rest for the night.

Together they walk to a stone quarry, where Henri climbs a wall of rocks and looks out to sea in a fit of artistic rapture – another setting reminiscent of Russell's romanticism of the natural world (Williams, 2007: 32). For the third and final time, Henri (through a jump cut) makes a strong and discontinuous upward movement, this time to the top of the quarry. His joy is contagious and Sophie does a dance by herself. He talks of his coming art exhibition and she promises to write a program for him, indicating how much she has subordinated her own creativity to Henri's. Finally they come across a little shack to rest in, but Henri becomes amorous. Sophie feels the stirring of sexual arousal, but after returning a passionate kiss she again becomes unnerved and backs away, mumbling in confusion that she'll marry him "after his exhibition".

Their reunion confirms that nothing has changed in terms of their sexual relationship, and Henri is becoming increasingly impatient and insensitive to her. Here we glimpse most clearly the barrier that prevents Sophie from making a full sexual commitment to Henri: she fears that his success will spoil their love, that he'll leave her when she no longer fulfills his need for "artistic companionship". Despite the macho bravado of Henri's artistic self, as a human being he relies on her emotional support like a little boy (Phillips, 1979: 121). But Sophie rejects vicarious success through him because her independent side is afraid of being engulfed by his energy. This visit to the sea is only their second (and last) excursion from the city to the country. The visit to Henri's parents' home, with their pledge, marked the affirmation of their love. This visit to the sea is the beginning of the end; it is becoming painfully clear that things are not ultimately going to work out between them.

Henri has begun sketching Gosh Boyle in the nude. They descend a palatial staircase, she totally naked, as she rambles on about her artistic pretensions. The "nude descending a staircase" motif employs a classical image for satirical purposes, another example of Russell's ironic irreverence reinforced by Henri's insulting treatment of Gosh. Henri then sculpts her father, the breathing stereotype of a pompous military officer, who verbally abuses Henri as he works. Henri's resentment towards the military is symbolized by his tearing off the clay model's nose – an act of rebellion, perhaps, but token at best. The sculpting of General Boyle is symbolic of the prostitution of the artist to the power elite that even Henri cannot avoid, and also leads the narrative directly into confrontation with the impending war.

Later Gosh enters Henri's railroad flat and mistakes Sophie, who is scrubbing the steps, for a servant. Henri jumps into bed with Gosh – both of them fully clothed, but the implication is clear. Sophie puts up a screen between them and sings loudly to blot out the noise of their passion. Gosh unbuckles Henri's pants while deriding Sophie's dull and puritanical lifestyle, then gets up and leaves. Henri and Sophie then have a tender, tentative reconciliation, but again we see Henri and Sophie's relationship on shaky ground. Despite his obvious scorn for Gosh, the delights of the flesh are becoming harder and harder for Henri to resist.

In this scene, the dynamism of the soundtrack builds to a crescendo through the interplay and layering of monologues. All three characters are vocal throughout the entire scene – Henri with his giggling laughter, Gosh with her preaching, and Sophie with her singing and screaming to drown out Gosh. When Gosh finally leaves and the laughter and singing end, the silence is truly deafening.

In a series of vignettes, Henri's life becomes besieged by society's push towards war. When Henri asks Corky to provide a title for a sculpture and Corky observes - very literally – that he sees a French mortar, Henri contradicts him: “No, call it Bird Swallowing Fish.” The artist cannot speak truth to power directly, but conveys his message through metaphor and symbol.

As Henri desperately chips away at his current sculpture, Gosh (now in military uniform) charges him with cowardice and lack of patriotism. Sophie in turn accuses him of irrelevance, of being a parasite living off the rich. He rejects their criticisms, until he reads in a newspaper of the bombing of the Rheims cathedral in France. What finally moves Henri to fight is not an abstract patriotism but the very real vision of his culture

being destroyed, particularly its works of art (historically, Gaudier-Brzeska's ancestors were believed to have been builders of the Chartres cathedral).

As Sophie refuses Henri's proposal during their last moments together in the railway arch studio, he is busy pounding nails into crates, ostensibly packaging statues for an exhibition. Russell uses sound effects metaphorically here: on the symbolic level, he is pounding nails into his own coffin, for Sophie's refusal sets into motion the chain of events leading to his enlistment and death. Later, standing below her window, Henri proposes one last time to Sophie, and again she refuses him. His strivings for marriage to Sophie have reached a dead end, and perhaps grasping for some new beginning or fresh inspiration, he departs to enlist in the infantry.

While in the film Gaudier's attitudes towards war appear ambivalent, the actual Gaudier not only fled to England to escape French conscription, but later escaped from jail after returning to France and being drafted, events not portrayed in Russell's film. Thus there is plenty of justification in the historical record for portraying Gaudier as fundamentally opposed to war, although changing circumstances ultimately led him to serve.

Sophie reads Henri's letters from the front and writes him back. Her narration expresses her regret for her rejection of Henri's proposal, saying that she would have married him. At the Vortex club, members of the cultural elite scoff in disdain at the enthusiasm of the accounts in his letters. Russell flexes his expressionist muscles by inter-cutting close-ups of the artistic intelligentsia with close-ups of a dancer, her face adorned with glitter and heavy make-up against a disco-colored background. After listening to Henri's letter about enjoying the war, one critic says, "Whoever wrote that

should be shot!” Corky replies: “He was...last Thursday.” The revelation of Gaudier’s death – amidst the sarcasm and disdain of the artistic crowd – could not be more piercing. Sophie weeps.

In a final lyrical montage, Henri’s many beautiful sculptures pass before our eyes, as we join the period Victorian gallery visitors and move among them. In the final shot, Sophie stands by an unfinished sculpture below the grating in the railway arch, as outside and above the crowd passes by in celebration of victory in the war.

The presentation of Gaudier-Brzeska’s exhibition after his death packs a powerful emotional punch. Essentially a lyrical documentary sequence, it presents his *actual* sculptures, richly beautiful – and what we have been enjoying as fiction suddenly becomes strikingly real. This man really existed, possessed artistic genius, and perished in one of history’s futile carnages. As we view what Gaudier-Brzeska created and imagine his potential, the true depth of his tragedy overwhelms the consciousness and drives home a powerful sense of loss.

Russell presents the exhibition through three levels of motion, all evenly paced: first, the slow tracking motion of the camera circling the sculptures; second, the actual turning of the sculptures themselves on rotating stands; and third, the motion of the spectators passing by the works. The editing pace is slow also, allowing us to linger on the fine detail in these magnificent pieces. Russell transforms the most static of situations - pieces of sculpture in a museum – into a graceful, dynamic and beautifully-paced sequence, affording the spectator several moments of meditation to let the full impact of Gaudier-Brzeska’s life and death sink in. It is one of the most powerful sequences Russell ever produced, all the more so for its austerity and restraint.

No less powerful is the final shot of the unfinished sculpture in Henri's underground studio. We recognize the sketch on the uncut stone, which represents the impenetrable finality of his death: just as earlier he turned a gravestone into a sculpture, so this unfinished work has become his epitaph. This final image also embodies perfectly the balance between symbol and narrative that permeates the visualization of Gaudier-Brzeska's story. Sophie stands by the stone as the crowd passes overhead in joyous celebration, in complete contrast to Sophie's sorrow. The screen is divided into two parts by a diagonal line that splits the socio-political reality above, dominated by light but also by illusion, from the shadowy underworld of the unconscious from which art emerges.

The emotional orchestral swell – one of the few strongly dramatic uses of music in the film – emphasizes the drama of Sophie's heartbroken reaction to Henri's death. Then, after the gentle score during the exhibition, military band music rises and dominates. Russell employs classic selections that are more expressive of the heights of exhilaration and the depths of despair. But it is interesting that Russell plays military band music over the end credits. There is an ambiguity in how this upbeat tempo juxtaposes death and joy; the source of the uplifting mood is the militaristic ethos Henri despised.

Now that we have examined the narrative and some of its aesthetic and structural elements, we are in a position to make some general judgments about how Ken Russell communicates meaning through film. Since Russell is often accused of distorting history in his films, it is important to note that many of the situations in the film, even down to specific lines of dialogue, were lifted directly from the letters in Ede's book. Certainly

events have been condensed for dramatic purposes, but the characters and events are drawn very closely from the meager historical record.

The most evident departure from the book is that the script weighs the emotional tone in favor of Gaudier. Historically, Henri and Sophie were more alike physically and emotionally – thin, sickly and lonely. Antony’s portrayal of a robust, extraverted Gaudier presents him in a better light, although the actual Gaudier did exhibit an amazing determination and assuredness (Lanza, 2007: 137). But he also saw himself as supportive of Sophie’s writing, a commitment not so evident in the film

While there is nothing in Russell’s writings or interviews to indicate a familiarity with Eisenstein’s theories of montage, he intuitively attempts to derive conflict from the dialectical opposition of virtually all the elements of graphic composition, movement, editing and sound. Russell plays foreground against background, horizontal against vertical, primary colors against their complements, movement against movement. He even varies the pattern of these contrasts, so that first we are presented with similarities between subjects, then with differences. Henri and Sophie move in one shot together: same speed, same level, same direction. Then suddenly, Henri is up there and Sophie is down there. First affinity, then contrast. The pattern always varies to keep the spectator off balance.

The characters in Russell’s films are passionate and desperate, living life at a fever pitch, at the extremes of feeling. They are “romantic idealists struggling against their own personalities in order to achieve a level of existence they regard as higher, more noble” (Dempsey, 1972: 14). In romantic relationships, his lovers are often brought together by their outcast status, often with little else in common. Henri and Sophie are

the physical and emotional embodiments of the principles of contrast and conflict. The core bond between them is that, although their ideals may alienate them from their peers, they share a sense of purpose which sustains them through their difficulties, and allows them to endure rejection by society, for the most part, with grace and humor and without bitterness.

Many critics accuse Russell as auteur of being “excessive,” favoring extravagant images, sounds, and performances, but he is by no means undisciplined as an artist (Dempsey, 1972: 13). The energy level in *Savage Messiah* is not chaotic but highly controlled; the visual treatment matches the emotional content. Sequences are paced evenly, each one designed to advance the narrative with precisely defined exposition of character or plot. Each makes its point economically and moves on, never lingering lest the relentless drive be lost. The fast pace of the dialogue gives the film a compulsive energy and contributes as much to the development of the characters as the words they actually speak (Hanke, 1984:179). The many tracking shots visually convey the restlessness of the characters, and the lighting is often dark and yet warm (Hanke, 1984: 183). The soundtrack also contributes to the dynamism; nearly always we have either dialogue or music, with very little “dead space” or atmospheric sound. Russell constantly addresses either our intellect or our emotions, often both simultaneously.

Similarly, Russell’s metaphors in *Savage Messiah* are always completely diageitic. They fall perfectly in harmony with the realistic action of the narrative, but are equally successful as metaphor. Abstract concepts are transformed into visual images through the process known in aesthetic theory as *concrete representability* or *artistic*

*condensation*, embodying complex relationships and themes in visual images, a technique distinctive of the filmic art at its most creative (Williams, 2007: 29).

In an era when the very nature of tragedy has been called into question, *Savage Messiah* stands to remind us that it is still possible. One does not depart the theater with a sense of despair or fatalism, but rather with a heightened appreciation of the human potential for greatness, a sadness at the limits and loss of that potential, and a realization that the very knowledge of inevitable death may be the most empowering incentive to make the most of our creativity during the brief time that we live.

## References

- Baxter, John (1973) *An Appalling Talent: Ken Russell*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Dempsey, Michael (1972) The World of Ken Russell, *Film Quarterly*, 25 (3), (Spring), pp. 13-25.
- Ede, S.E. (1931) *Savage Messiah: Gaudier-Brzeska*. New York, NY: Literary Guild.
- Fisher, Iain (2000) An Interview with Ken Russell.  
<http://www.iainfisher.com/russell/ken-russell-interview.html>.
- Gomez, Joseph A. (1976-1) *Ken Russell: the Creator as Adapter*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Gomez, Joseph A. (1976-2) Russell's Methods of Adaptation: Savage Messiah and Tommy, in Thomas R. Atkins (ed.), *Ken Russell*. New York, NY: Monarch Press, pp. 69-95.
- Hanke, Ken (1984) *Ken Russell's Films*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.
- Lanza, Joseph (2007) *Phallic Frenzy: Ken Russell and his Films*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review.
- Phillips, Gene D. (1979) *Ken Russell*, Boston, MA: Twayne.
- Russell, Ken (1991) *Altered States: the Autobiography of Ken Russell*, New York. NY: Bantam.
- Russell, Ken. (2001) *Directing Film*. Washington, DC: Brassey's.
- Williams, Linda Ruth (2007) Ken Russell: Sweet Smell of Excess, *Sight and Sound* 17 (7), (July), pp. 28-32.

## Filmography

*Savage Messiah*. 1972. Dir. Ken Russell. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.