

Moonstruck Follies.

Ken Russell's *Salome's Last Dance* (1988) as Baroque Performance

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Abstract

It has become a common trope to speak of Ken Russell's films as somehow 'baroque'. But what does that really mean? This article seeks to clarify this question by looking at one of Russell's most overlooked films, *Salome's Last Dance*. This is a play-within-the-film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's decadent play, which calls to mind similar approaches to the theatre that are associated primarily with the baroque stage of the seventeenth century (play-within-the-play, *mise-en-abîme*). By looking at the way Russell uses these structural devices we will gain insight in a deeper baroque structure in his work. But in the course of the analysis we will also debunk some myths that have accrued to the figure of Salome and her dance of the seven veils. Although Russell's films are most commonly classified as baroque on account of their excessive visual style, this article shows that the real baroque is happening inside, in the way the film (and Russell's work in general) is structured.

Résumé

On appelle les films de Ken Russell 'baroques' presque par habitude. Mais qu'est-ce que cette qualification signifie vraiment? Cet article cherche à clarifier l'aspect baroque de l'oeuvre russellien en prenant comme exemple l'un de ces films les plus oubliés, *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), une adaptation intégrale de la pièce décadente d'Oscar Wilde, mise en scène par Russell à la manière qui est associé, typiquement, avec le théâtre français du XVIIe siècle. Cette analyse permet de voir comment des tropes baroques (théâtre dans le théâtre, mise-en-abîme) s'y réalisent, à la fois dans ce film spécifique et dans la filmographie de Russell en général. En cours de route, nous tenteront également de démystifier quelques mythes qui se sont attachés au personnage de Salomé et à sa danse des sept voiles. Bien que les films de Russel soient très souvent et trop facilement qualifiés comme baroques pour raison de leur style excessivement visuel, l'article défend la position que les aspects baroques de ce film s'articulent à l'intérieur de ce film (et les autres films de Russell), dans la façon dont il est structurée.

Keywords

Ken Russell, Oscar Wilde, Salome, Baroque, Performance

It has been said, and not by way of compliment, that Ken Russell (1927-2011) was a baroque filmmaker. Throughout his career critics have been irritated and outraged by what Pauline Kael, who never did get to like Russell's work, called "Russell's baroque vulgarity" (1973 241). Joseph Gomez, who is one of Russell's best critics, certainly agreed that Russell's films "seek the baroque, or what could be called an operatic style" (39). Stephen Calloway, writing appreciatively on baroque trends in the twentieth century, nevertheless deplores that Russell seemed "to use baroque excess as an end in itself" (181). And director Lindsay Anderson felt that "British cinema lost its way with the romantic neo-baroque of [Nicolas] Roeg and Ken Russell" (qtd. in Hacker and Price 55), while Richard Eder of the *New York Times* took things a step further, at least in terms of art-historical chronology, and diagnosed Russell with "post-Beatles Rococo", arguing that for Russell "the shortest line between two points is a pretzel, preferably painted gold and doped" (quoted in Lanza 191). Barry Keith Grant more or less summarized Russell criticism when he wrote that "commentators commonly see Russell as vulgar, tasteless, excessive, puerile, misogynistic, and even misanthropic" (24). But besides being fun to read, this kind of criticism also points towards a problem in categorizing, for apart from a certain penchant for what a sympathetic critic has called "their exuberant vitality and visual panache" (Williams 29), there seems to be considerable confusion as to what actually constitutes 'baroque' in this case. Beyond the common denominator of a certain excessive visual flair the underlying concepts of baroque seem to be all over the place, borrowed not from history or art history but from the realm of everyday language, where baroque equals the overwrought and the loud, as in Susan Rice's review of *Tommy* (1975) which read, "in its entirety: 'Ken Russell's rendering of The Who's rock opera is loud, really loud'" (quoted in Rosenfeldt 109).

A more systematic way of understanding Russell's work as baroque could be to simply read it as a contemporary reprise of a form of theatrical performativity associated specifically with seventeenth century baroque theatre. For literary critics one of the key innovations of the baroque stage was its self-reflexivity, its uncanny ability to point at itself in performance and say:

look at me, I'm a play! Two important ways of generating this effect were the play-within-the-play and the so-called *mise-en-abîme*. These two procedures are related yet distinct. The play-within-the-play is a structural feature of baroque theatre, a conceit whereby several characters in a play become spectators of a play performed within the framing narrative, echoing the relationship between the original, framing play and the actual spectators in the theatre. The *mise-en-abîme* is a thematic trope and is quite literally a mirroring effect (Forestier 13). It refers to the potentially infinite self-reflection that emerges when a play starts mirroring its own action or begins to comment on it. The self-reflexive effect of baroque theatre is most overwhelming when the structural and the thematic self-reflexivity coincide. This happens when a play-within-the-play is used to reveal something about the characters or plot in the original framing story. This is the way the performance of the *Mousetrap* is used in *Hamlet*. Russell has used the play-within-the-play as a revelatory *mise-en-abîme* in his film *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), which is a play-within-the-film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893). In this film Russell uses these tropes to reflect, through the play-within-the-film, on his own position as an artist. Therefore it would seem to be a very good place to start an investigation of whether and how Russell is 'baroque'. The film is also one of the director's most neglected efforts, which makes a critical discussion all the more timely.

Critics have again been generally dismissive of the film, with *Time Out's* Geoff Andrew speaking for many when he called it "Russell's worst film to date". I believe this harsh assessment is wrong. I will argue that *Salome's Last Dance* offers a number of crucial clues to understanding Russell's approach to his art. I will show how Russell activates a baroque hall of mirrors by appropriating Wilde's work and introducing himself into the material. This introduction is achieved first by Russell's decision to perform a parody of himself as an actor in the film, but also in the way Russell chooses to dramatize Wilde's play within the film. From reading Russell's film next to Wilde's play some basic insights into Russell's aesthetic practices will emerge. Our close reading of Russell and Wilde, and especially our discussion of the infamous dance of the seven veils, will also help debunk several myths about Salome, Wilde's play, and androgyny. But if the film is visually lush, over-decorated, and purple to the hilt (and it is all of the above) – if, in short, the film revels in baroque visual excess, then our close reading of the film should also provide us with important clues towards an understanding of how the baroque is put into play by Russell and how 'baroque' can be made to do more for the director

(and for us) than perform a critic's abuse.

Appropriating Salome

It is November 5, 1892, and Oscar Wilde (Nickolas Grace) is visiting his favourite male brothel. He is bringing along his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas (Douglas Hodge), for company. Wilde has just learned that his play *Salomé* has been banned by the Lord Chamberlain because it depicts biblical scenes, which is against the law. What he doesn't know, is that the denizens of the whorehouse, under the direction of its proprietor, Alfred Taylor (Stratford Johns), have mounted a clandestine amateur performance of the play for Wilde's benefit. Alfred Douglas will play Iokanaan, or John the Baptist; Taylor himself will be Herod; and Herodias is impersonated by a mysterious woman who turns out to be Lady Alice Fitz Kensington Windsor (Glenda Jackson), possibly a reference to the decadent coterie of the Prince of Wales, in whose circles Wilde and many other prominent homosexuals gravitated. The part of Salome goes to the diminutive chambermaid Rose (Imogen Millais-Scott). The plot of the play is well known. The young princess Salome becomes enamoured of the imprisoned John the Baptist, who repudiates her. Herod in turn lusts after Salome. This makes him a very wicked tetrarch, for Salome is actually the daughter of his brother and Herodias. Herod had his brother killed so that he could have Herodias to himself. Now he wants the daughter, too. In a drunken moment he promises Salome anything she wants if she will only dance for him. Unluckily, she demands John the Baptist's head on a silver charger. There is no changing her mind and before he knows it Herod has killed a prophet so that a slinky vixen may kiss his decapitated head. Repulsed, Herod has Salome killed and the curtain falls. However, at the end of this particular performance the police show up to arrest Wilde (for gross indecency) and Taylor (for running a disorderly house) only to find that poor Rose has been killed, too.

The above is more or less a *précis* of *Salome's Last Dance*. Despite its minuscule budget the film looks gorgeous. Russell's staging of the play in fact recalls the plans for *Salomé's* abortive first performance, which was supposed to have starred Sarah Bernhardt but was cancelled when the Lord Chamberlain banned the play. For the planned first performance Wilde had asked his friend, the artist Charles Ricketts, to design the sets and costumes. In later years, Ricketts recalled that he "proposed a black floor – upon which Salomé's white feet would show; this statement was meant to capture Wilde. The sky was to be a rich turquoise blue, cut across by

the perpendicular fall of gilt matting, which should not touch the ground, and so form a sort of aerial tent above the terrace. Did Wilde actually suggest the division of the actors into separate masses of colours, to-day the idea seems mine! His was the scheme, however, that the Jews should be in yellow, the Romans were to be in purple, the soldiery in bronze green and John in white” (243-244). Although Russell has not rigidly adopted these particular colour patterns, he does create a very similar artificial environment where characters are covered in body-paint or adorned like *objets d’art*. This is especially true of Glenda Jackson, whose luxuriously elaborate dress as Herodias recalls Ricketts’ later designs for *Montezuma* (ca. 1925) and for *Lady Macbeth* (1926). After the performance of the play *Lady Alice* in fact tells Wilde and Taylor that the dress she wore as Herodias was actually her usual attire as *Lady Macbeth*. But the film also takes some liberties with historical truth. For example, Wilde wasn’t arrested until 1895. Furthermore, he never saw *Salomé* performed. The first performance was mounted in 1896, and in Paris, in a gesture of support for the imprisoned Wilde. By pushing all these events back to one night in 1892 Russell, who wrote the script (incorporating a new translation of Wilde’s play by his then wife Vivian Jolly), takes considerable liberties with historical truth for dramatic effect.

What makes this film especially interesting within Russell’s body of work, is the fact that the director himself plays a significant role in the film as Kenneth, a pornographic photographer who takes snapshots of all the titillating moments in the play. Russell’s role is an obvious wink at his popular (or unpopular) reputation among dismissive critics. It was Robin Wood who famously accused Russell of committing “a sort of cultural pornography, both degraded and degrading” (909). Pauline Kael had earlier written in a review of *Savage Messiah* (1972) that Russell’s films indulge in a “porn of fame” and that they “cheapen everything they touch” (1976 50, 52). Alexander Walker, whom Russell once struck over the head with a copy of his own newspaper, has in turn called Russell “a master of ... the porno-biography which is not quite pornography but is far from being biography” (389). Reviewing *Salome’s Last Dance* in particular, Roger Ebert has remarked that “Russell demonstrates again that he is most interested in literary figures when their trousers are unbuttoned” (quoted in Prash 196). So it is hardly surprising that Russell should cast himself as a photographer of dirty pictures. But there is more to the part than that. Russell not only shares his first name Kenneth with the part, he in fact started his career as a photographer. Before he turned to film-making, Russell worked in the navy, the air force, the ballet even, but also as a stills and fashion photographer in the 1950’s.

This aspect of his work has always been known but it is only recently that his photographs from that era have resurfaced. This resulted in a number of exhibitions, most notably of a series of pictures of Teddy Girls he made in bombed-out houses in London's East End in 1955. Russell next turned to photography as the topic of his short television documentary *Watch the Birdie* (1963), a portrait of the future Magnum photographer David Hurn, whom Russell had also featured as one of the tenants of a boarding-house he himself had previously lived in for *A House in Bayswater* (1960), another early television documentary.

But there is a deeper sense in which Russell's presence in the film is made tangible. The structure of the film in fact reflects Russell's notion that his films are always reflections of his own experience of his source material. Explaining his method in the production notes for *Mahler* (1974), Russell concedes that "most of my films on composers evolve through a stream of consciousness in which the man and the myth, the music and its meaning, time, place, dream and fact all flow and blend into the mainstream of the film itself. ... My film is simply about some of the things I feel when I think of Mahler's life and listen to his music" (6). Similarly, of *Lisztomania* (1975) Russell said that his film "isn't biography. ... It comes from things I feel when I listen to the music of Wagner and Liszt, and when I think about their lives" (qtd. in Lanza, 182). Russell's method could be described, metaphorically, as a prism. There is material out there in the world, such as the life of a famous artist, and this material is represented in Russell's work as refracted through the prism of his perception of it. This refraction implies an act of interpretation and hence a distancing from 'objective' truth (whatever that may be). This means that Russell's take on his material always implies, to some extent, a fictionalisation and an appropriation: Russell takes his material and swallows it up into his own universe. Notions of truth and reality are temporarily suspended. What matters is the *experience* that Russell provides by rearranging facts into his own vision of them, which includes fantasy sequences that are visual fugues on the biographical source material.

This stream of consciousness approach takes us right into the heart of *Salome's Last Dance*, but via a detour over Walter Pater, who profoundly influenced Wilde. In the infamous conclusion to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) Pater claimed that "experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of

the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (119). Pater here formulates a radical form of epistemological scepticism bordering on solipsism. And it fed deeply into the work of Oscar Wilde, especially his aesthetic theory as expressed in the dialogue ‘The Decay of Lying’, where Wilde argues that all facts are in reality human constructs. Hence Wilde’s famous dictum that Nature imitates Art: just like Art, Nature is what/how we make it. Contrary to what we have often been told, it is not art that holds the mirror up to nature, but the other way around. Since there are no facts and no reality outside of Art, Wilde can claim that “Art never expresses anything but itself” (CW 1087). Wilde explains that “Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. ... At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say they were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them” (CW 1086). Wilde is here arguing that we cannot make sense of the sensory data we experience (what Wilde calls seeing) until some order has been imposed upon them by highlighting (what Wilde calls looking at) some aspects at the expense of others (which may be *seen*, but are not *noticed* as salient to experience). Wilde next famously applied this insight to the Japanese: “do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? ... The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. ... The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people” (CW 1088).

Art as expression of nothing except itself is a further development of Pater’s claim that experience is a merely private sensual continuum. Wilde simply claims what was already latent in Pater: the ability (or the right) to generate one’s own world and hover in it indefinitely. It further implies that our identities are also part of what we create. To exist is to generate oneself. Identity, or the self, becomes a work of art, a performance. Finally, for Pater the primacy of experience as a self-contained creation of self also implies that one must always maintain the flow of sensual impressions by “for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions” (120).

This is the infamous theory of sensual curiosity that caused outrage because it could be read as an invitation to indulge in homosexual experimentation. To be a creative self is to indulge every curiosity, however morbid or sensual. These insights were of key strategic importance to Wilde, who was entangled, along with many other prominent homosexuals of his time, in an attempt to generate support for recognition of the homosexual identity. When Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (first in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, and the next year in expanded book form) it caused outrage because it was clearly perceived by critics as an apology for what was considered immoral sexual behaviour. By creating a work of art that so clearly and unmistakably reflected on himself as a private person, Wilde was courting legal disaster but also making a strategic move in making homosexuality visible and creating a style for it. I suggest that *Salomé* is part of this effort. I will argue that in *Salomé* Wilde attempted to create a completely self-contained world that exemplifies the principles of his aesthetic. It puts into artistic practice the principles of the generation of self and world that also governed Wilde's real-life self-fashioning. Unlike *Dorian Gray*, however, there is no overt attempt at self-portrait in the play. If anything, the play shows us the *inside* of Wilde's mind, his ideal of what aesthetic experience should be: one long extended and self-contained sensual dream that has no relation to the outside world. I will dedicate the next section to showing how Wilde achieves this encapsulated aesthetic dream in the play and then return to Russell's film, which to a large extent reproduces its effect.

Dreaming Salomé

Just like Russell's film initially found few if any defenders, Wilde's *Salomé* "has long been considered thin, pretentious, and unoriginal" (Elliot 133). I will try to adjust this view and show that Wilde's play is very tightly constructed. *Salomé* is structured as a continuous, undulating, but intensifying movement towards its brutal finale, which makes it an almost paradigmatic example of Wilde's sensationalism as an enveloping experience. This structure also gives the play a musical quality. Wilde's friend, the writer Richard Le Gallienne, noted in a February 22, 1893 review that "It seems to build to music. Its gradual growth is exactly like the development of a theme in music" (quoted in WL 552n1). After his release from prison Wilde wrote a letter to Alfred Douglas claiming the play's structure was modelled on the ballad form: "The recurring phrases of *Salomé*, that bind it together like a piece of music with recurring motifs, are, and were to me, the artistic equivalent of the refrains of old ballads" (WL 874). The engine that drives this

movement is Salome's childlike desire to get anything she wants because it has been promised her. For this reason Joseph Donohue has argued that the core theme of *Salomé* is "unbridled curiosity and insatiable thirst for new experience". In her attraction to John the Baptist and her demand for his head on a silver charger, Salome takes Pater's (and Wilde's) imperative of sensual curiosity to the extreme and has to suffer the penalty of death for her impudence. Curiosity kills the vixen. In this sense, "the play is about illicit but overwhelming desire and its fateful clash with ultimate authority" and what is represented in *Salomé* is "unquenchably strong desire itself" (126, 121, 130). Salome's childlike rapture in her own desire is made clear in her total obliviousness to the external world. At a certain point a Syrian guard who is in love with Salome commits suicide because he is jealous of her love for Iokanaan. He falls dead at her feet, but Salome doesn't even blink, let alone acknowledge this alarming intrusion. She is simply too wrapped up in herself to notice anything outside her own desire, which recalls Pater's claim that in the rush of solipsistic sensualism no voice from the outside world can reach us.

But Salome is not the only desiring person in this play. Throughout the play, the dynamics of desire unfold along the characters' lustful gazes. Characters constantly remark on the way other characters look at people. At the beginning of the play Herodias's page repeatedly accuses the Syrian guard (who will kill himself) of looking at Salome too much (the page is in love with the Syrian guard). Later it is Herodias who repeatedly accuses Herod of looking too much at Salome. The way the characters look at each other expresses their desire for each other (the page wants the Syrian, who wants Salome, who wants Iokanaan; Herod wants Salome). Salome's thirst for new experience can also be traced through a narrowing of her desiring gaze as it moves over Iokanaan's body. Once she has laid eyes on him, Salome slowly becomes drunk on her impressions of him. After she has taken in the beauty of his body in its entirety, she focuses on its parts. She is first seduced by his voice ("*Parle encore, Iokanaan. Ta voix m'enivre*"; WS 81), after which it is his skin, his hair, and his mouth that she lusts for. But the journey of her gaze over his body is dialectical. Every sexual overture Salome makes is forcefully repudiated by the Baptist. This in turn causes her to repudiate her own appreciation of his beauty: she calls ugly what she had first called beautiful. But in praising Iokanaan's beauty and next repudiating him (as he repudiates her) Salome demonstrates Wilde's principle that one can change or create the world of appearances through verbal descriptions of it. If Salome says Iokanaan's body is beautiful, it is beautiful. If she says it is ugly, it becomes ugly. Nature imitates Art by the force of

will. Similarly, when she is finally face to face with the Baptist's severed head, Salome repeats several times that she will kiss it, again illustrating Wilde's claim that speech can create reality: she is already savouring the act and making it real through uttering it. And once she has kissed the head, she immediately uses language to extend the experience beyond the moment by repeating like a mantra that "*J'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan, j'ai baisé ta bouche*" (WS 165). This fetishism of body parts is finally also expressed in a remarkable stage direction that Wilde provides for the appearance of Iokanaan's head, which emerges from the well pushed up by "*Un grand bras noir, le bras du bourreau*" (165). The Executioner's arm is here objectified as support for the charger with the head. Together, arm and charger form a perverse *objet d'art*.

Elliot L. Gilbert has correctly argued that "Salomé is essentially a play about power: about who is to have it, who is to exercise it, how it is to be transmitted" (148). This struggle for power is intricately linked to the unbridled lust that I have identified as the play's central theme because lust is one of the means by which people exercise power over each other in the play. It also brings us to the question of who conjures up this world of intense mutual voyeurism. If Nature imitates Art because Nature is our private invention, then someone must be pulling the strings behind the scenes of Salome's final nocturne. If reality is all in our head, then whose head do these highly charged erotic events inhabit? I suggest that the world of the play is conjured up in a tug of war. Each character is projecting his or her own desires onto the others and onto the surrounding world. In the case of Salome this happens to the total exclusion of the exterior world (witness her failing to notice the death of the Syrian). But the person who stands most to lose in this war is of course Herod, the tetrarch, who is, nominally, ruler of this realm. Being the tetrarch he has a self-evident claim to being "the sole author of the universe in which he exists" (146), both in the artistic sense of creating his own fantasy and in the sense that, as ruler, he has absolute power over the external world, including the power to decide on life and death (as Salome will soon find out). But his power is challenged by Salome, who breaks the idyll of his fantasy with her sudden, unreasonable demand for the Baptist's head. The fantasy thus disturbed, Herod cancels it altogether. He almost stops the play by literally pulling the plugs on it: he orders the torches to be extinguished, but also, and much more remarkably, to hide the moon and the stars ("*Cachez la lune! Cachez les étoiles!*"; SW 165). Wilde's stage instructions at this point direct that the slaves extinguish the fires, but the stars simply "disappear" ("*disparaissent*"; 165) and a black cloud moves in to cover the moon.

Herod fears the moon, which is associated throughout the play with some uncontrollable and threatening force. Herodias's page several times observes that "*la lune a l'air étrange!*" (WS 73) and associates this strange air with death. After the Syrian has killed himself the page claims that he had suspected "*que la lune cherchait un mort*" (WS 87) and berates himself for not hiding the Syrian from her influence. In the second part of the play it is Herod who remarks on the moon's strange air, which feeds into his many superstitions. For Herod not only fears the moon, but also Iokanaan, who is a prophet who might bring the wrath of his god over Herod's house. He also fears the rumours about Christ moving around the country, performing miracles, and raising the dead. The only person who is immune to all this superstitious moon-gazing is Herodias, who claims that all these people are fools and that "*Ils ont trop regardé la lune*" (WS 115). Thus she equates moon-gazing with lunacy, which is literally moon-induced madness. So if you are a superstitious Herod with a dead Baptist on your hands, extinguishing the moon might seem like a good idea. But the only way Herod could command the moon and the stars in such a way would be if the entire fictional world of the play were his own creation. And it is. All the world's a stage, and the artist who creates the scene (in this case Herod) can manage its props at will. Or, as Wilde puts it in 'The Decay of Lying', Art "makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread" (CW 1082).

But once the lights are down Herod also calls the final curtain on Salome by having her killed. In this grisly act of brutal murder Herod restores his power over his own fantasy. We do not learn Herodias's response to this butchery, but we can imagine her lurking, Medea-like, in the wings, plotting bloody revenge. At this point, however, it doesn't matter anymore, for with the darkening of the scene the characters have melted into air. But not entirely, for Art spills over into Life. At the very end of Russell's film something highly dramatic occurs, but it is dealt with in such a cavalier way that it is easy to miss it: Rose, the chambermaid who played Salome, is actually killed by the spear that pierces Salome. The murder in the play has been used as a foil for the murder of the girl. At the beginning of the film Alfred Taylor briefly threatens he might kill the girl if she does not perform properly. But it seems unlikely that he is behind the murder in some kind of real-life parallel to Herod's murder of Salome. During the performance of the play we see Herodias/Lady Alice disappear into a trunk behind the scenes to have sex with several actors who play Roman guards. At the end, when she and Wilde and Taylor are bundled into a police carriage and the body of the girl is carried by, Lady Alice looks straight at the camera and

proudly proclaims that it was death through misadventure because the girl slipped on a banana peel. Salome had indeed eaten a banana during the performance and dropped the peel on the stage. But it obviously was not the peel that killed Rose. Lady Alice's triumphant tone suggests that she used her feminine wiles on one of the actors playing the Roman guards to neutralise an erotic rival.

Gendering Salome

By having *Salomé* performed in a *huis clos* situation, and in a brothel at that, Russell achieves something quite similar to the enclosed world of private sensual experience that Wilde generates in the play. However, the choice to limit most of the action in the film to one set, was not entirely artistic. Russell had to bring the film in on a very minor budget and using only one set was a way of drastically cutting costs (Prasch 201). But in the process, this necessity was made into a virtue: by enclosing his entire virtual world in this one room Russell could create his spectacle as if it were an exotic world seen under a glass jar. With its anti-naturalistic colours, its conscious use of anachronistic details (Salome licking a lollipop, bare-breasted women and Roman soldiers wearing black leather SM accoutrements) and especially its garish body paints and elaborately ornate costumes, the play-within-the-film looks like a theatrical specimen bred in a Huysmans hothouse ruled by Herodias, the regal orchid. What matters, is not the plot development in itself, which is pretty straightforward, but the overall *experience* of looking at (and listening to) the gorgeous spectacle. I suggest that this explains why Wilde wrote the play as a one-act piece: to have no breaks or interruptions that could disturb the flow of experience for the viewer. Similarly, Russell's highly ornate staging of the play treats the piece like an intricate *objet d'art* rather than a dramatic event. But Russell departs from Wilde and Pater because he *does* break the flow of events. His favourite device for doing this is breaking the fourth wall to either allow Wilde to comment on the performance or to show us the goings on behind the scenes. Just like he disrupts the 'objective' facts of the lives of the artists about whom he makes his films, Russell disrupts Wilde's play by sabotaging its flow. By doing this, Russell is again referring to his critical reputation. Some critics have suggested that Russell's films tend to degenerate into a structural vaudeville: a series of only loosely connected sequences that are devised to impress us in their own right. This is exactly the way he treats Wilde's *Salomé*, presenting us with exquisitely performed sections of the play intercut with campy meta-silliness.

The high point of the play is of course the dance of the seven veils. In Russell's treatment there is an added *frisson* because as the last veil drops (to the tunes of Grieg's 'In the Halls of the Mountain King') Salome is briefly shown with a penis. In his Russell biography Joseph Lanza suggests that the gender switch came about because Millais-Scott was weakened through illness and needed a body double for the dance sequence (275-276). Russell found a male dancer of similar physique and included a brief full-frontal shot of the young man flashing his genitals as a kinky visual surprise for Wilde (and us). But Russell also provides a diegetical justification for this flash. Herod is quite drunk by the time Salome starts dancing, and in his inebriated perception (suggested via a number of point of view shots of Salome from Herod's position) there very briefly appear two Salome figures simultaneously just before the climactic revelation. These doubles almost immediately melt back into one. When the reconstituted Salome next flashes her suddenly male physique, this startling sight is immediately drowned in the flash of Kenneth's camera, capturing the saucy moment, after which a proudly full frontal nude Salome has again been reconstituted a woman, ready to collect her reward. But for the critic this brief moment of gender disturbance opens a can of worms. The dance of the seven veils has acquired almost mythical stature in the critical literature. Critics have projected so much onto it that it is rather sobering to find that Wilde's stage directions for it are a mere "Salomé danse la danse des sept voiles" (WS 141). It is unclear from this how the dance is supposed to be staged. Possibly there was some naughty speculation about it on the part of Wilde himself and Aubrey Beardsley, who created the famous illustrations for the play (some of which are shown during the opening credits of the film). There is a copy of the play with a dedication to Beardsley dated (in Wilde's hand) "March '93. For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance" (WL 578). However, Wilde's sparse directions have not prevented some critics of finding all kinds of coded meanings in the dance. Amanda Fernbach, for instance, argues (in a very Freudian reading) that the dance "signifies gender undecidability and subsequently allows for the masked expression of gay erotics, as the body of a potentially male Salome is eroticised through the sexually charged dance. As a fetishistic or male homosexual fantasy, Salome's dance has the power to seduce only while a last veil remains" (201).

This analysis suggests that Fernbach has been looking at Russell's film rather than reading Wilde's text. But she is not alone. In his discussion of the critical reception of *Salome's*

Last Dance Thomas Prasch points out that several feminist critics have been tempted to see Wilde's *Salome* as an androgynous figure. They usually rely on a combination of sources including Aubrey Beardsley's highly androgynous illustrations for the play, a famous photograph of Wilde himself posing in drag as Salome, and Russell's gender-bending revelation in the film (203-204). We now know that the person in the photograph is not Wilde but the actress Alice Guszalewicz, who looks uncannily like him (Holland 10-12). As for Beardsley's images, they (briefly) postdate the writing of the play and are works of art in their own right. As such they, as much as Russell's film, already constitute an *interpretation* of the play, which makes it hazardous to infer anything about intended or implicit androgyny in Wilde's play from Beardsley's images. Not that this has stopped anyone. Elaine Showalter, for example, claims in her book *Sexual Anarchy* (1990) that *Salomé* is "a heterosexual play by a homosexual writer with a gay sexual subtext". This is a claim, not a point that is argued. Showalter next includes Beardsley's drawings in the discussion and claims that they "bring out all too powerfully the secret or unspeakable subtext of the play, especially its homo-erotic and blasphemous elements". What this subtext might be, and how she finds it in the play, remains very much her unspoken secret. In fact, Showalter's discussion of the figure of Salome, which takes up a full chapter in her book, does not even pretend to begin an analysis of Wilde's text but simply takes the subtext as a given. She does share, however, her firm (but unargued) conviction that "the dance Beardsley sees [in Wilde's letter quoted above] is the dance of gender, the delicacy and permeability of the veil separating masculine from feminine, licit from illicit desire" (151-152).

Returning to Russell's film and its climactic phallic surprise, we must acknowledge that although such gender-bending might certainly be in the spirit of Wilde, it is clearly and emphatically Russell's invention (after all, he *could* have found a female substitute for Millais-Scott). There is nothing in the play to suggest that Salome is a character of uncertain sex or gender. Hence, the flashing of the penis in Russell's film is a comment made by Russell on the play and its performance. This makes perfect sense. It is Russell's decision, not Wilde's, to locate the performance in a male (or mixed) brothel. Since the performance of the play in the film is clearly conceived as a decadent little gay get-together among friends (with several gorgeously decorated transvestites filling minor roles in the play) such a gender-bending visual pun is only to be expected. It has an air of music hall or cabaret indulgence. It is vaudeville. I would suggest that the substitution for Millais-Scott (and once you know of the substitution, it is very clearly a

male body that is seen performing most of the dance of the seven veils) simply provided Russell with an opportunity for a wink and a nudge in the tradition of saucy British humour. To infer too much about the figure of Salome (or Wilde's intentions) from this brief revelation is, in my opinion, to overstep the boundaries of critical caution, especially if one reads the film, as I have argued one should, as essentially Russell's fantasy of Wilde's play. As spectators, we are locked in the room with Russell's performers. What we see, is what we are allowed to see within the bell jar of Russell's self-enclosed imagining of the play as performed in an imaginary whorehouse that is several times removed from its historical model. The film, and the play-within-the-film, exist in Russell's mind, and nowhere else. Russell's own presence as Kenneth the pornographer only serves to underscore this. To comment on the film, and to comment on the performance of the play within the film, is therefore to comment on an artist's interpretation and appropriation of another artist's work. This is something quite distinct from commenting on the original artist's work, however closely related both artists' methods may be (as I have argued they are).

What does all of this entail for the mythical dance of the seven veils? Exactly nothing. What started as an eloquently minimalist stage direction in Wilde's play has ballooned into something not unlike the hitchcockian MacGuffin: something that everybody is chasing although it isn't really there (or, if it is there, it turns out to be meaningless, a red herring, an empty box, or a mere minimalist stage direction). For that reason it can also be whatever we want it to be, making it an ideal site for projection. The dance of the seven veils ultimately exists as much in our minds as Wilde's Nature (in fact, Wilde was very wise not to detail the dance of the seven veils because he must have known that nothing within the bounds of what could legally be represented on a British stage could ever live up to the wild fantasies that the notion of such a dance conjures up in sexually overheated minds). This also explains why critics have felt so free to bring to it what they want. But whatever they bring to it, or read into it, is of their own creation. This brings to mind Wilde's famous and ingenious justification for the supposed homosexual content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray," Wilde wrote. "What Dorian Gray's sins are, no one knows. He who finds them has brought them'" (WL 439). Similarly, what critics find in the unspoken dance of the seven veils is something they bring themselves. And, like Greeks bearing interpretations, they have brought plenty. But there are many hazards and much mischief in all this hunting for phalluses on gender-bent vixens in veils. For this reason it might be wise to heed Herod's advise in the play that "*Il ne faut pas trouver des*

symboles dans chaque chose qu'on voit. Cela rend la vie impossible" (WS 137). In the case of Salome I believe this means that the time has come to release the poor girl from the phallus she has been forced to drag around all this time for the benefit of (mostly) feminist critics. From a homosexual substitute to a Medusa-like androgyne, Salome has been (allowed to be) everything except herself. But for goodness' sake: let the woman be a woman.

A Dramatic Case of Death

Poor Rose. In the process of stripping away the many layers that make up the seductive surface of both *Salomé* and *Salome's Last Dance* we seem once again to have lost track of her. But her theatrical death is of crucial importance to a baroque understanding of Russell's film. Not excessive baroque, not over-decorated baroque, but baroque as it constitutes seventeenth-century theatre. To stage Rose's death in this context, we need to make a final excursion. Baroque theatre thrived on the thrill of knowing that the audience knew that everything was a performance. This made it possible for authors to introduce plays-within-the-play, because they knew that the audience knew how to read such shifts in narrative planes. It also means that there was room to play with these conventions, allowing several narrative planes to spill over into each other. Frames become porous, establishing an "overflow of theatrical into real space" (Egginton 79) with actors mingling among the spectators, or spectators sitting on the stage and performing the role of spectators-in-the-framing-play (Forestier 68, 100-101; Sennett 75). In *Salome's Last Dance* Russell is playing with this permeability of the baroque scene. By constantly breaking the fourth wall between the performers on stage and Wilde, he allows the parallels between their real-life relationships and the relationships between the characters in the play to come to the fore, up to the point that Wilde says that he himself should have played the Baptist to Bosie's Salome, which is of course a wry comment (introduced by Russell) on the real-life tragedy to come (Wilde's trial and conviction, brought about in no small part through Bosie's insistence that the author file a complaint against the Marquess of Queensberry).

By introducing himself into the film and the play, Russell further exploits the permeability of reality and fiction. I have argued that it is hazardous to read *Salomé* as a play with a gay subtext. The homosexual desire of Herodias's page for the Syrian is hardly hidden beneath the surface, and there are no further homosexual motifs, except, of course, in the broad sense that Salome's forbidden desire for the Baptist could be read as a metaphor for the love that dare not

speak its name (Bosie's florid description of homosexuality, introduced in his poem 'The Two Loves', published in 1894; WL 625, 703). But there is a lot of subtext, on the other hand, to Russell's presence in the film. Apart from performing a parody on his own reputation as a cultural pornographer, Russell can also be seen handling the stage effects, such as lightning and thunder. As such, Kenneth, the character played by the real-life Kenneth Russell, is responsible for the *machinerie* of the play. In this respect, Russell's self-dramatisation has an interesting historical parallel if we consider that, in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière introduced himself as a character in his own play, commenting on how it should be performed, which generates a *mise-en-abîme* of considerably steep profundity. Molière's performance as author in a sense overflows the boundaries between fact and fiction as he becomes at once author of, character in, and dramatised critic of his own play (Forestier 154). Similarly, in *Salome's Last Dance*, Russell is the writer of the screenplay, the director of the film, and an actor in the film. But as actor in the film he performs a role that is a parody of himself, photographing naughty bits, managing stage effects, and, ultimately, also showing up as a character in the play-within-the-film. Whatever we learn about Russell in this film, we know and learn through the art. His self-portrait as Kenneth is itself a performance. Similarly, Wilde himself is presented, in the film, as an artistic performance, for a large chunk of his dialogue in the film is actually a collage (compiled by Russell, of course) of a number of his famous witticisms and aphorisms. Wilde is constructed almost entirely as a literary work of art.

Now for death. By having Rose killed, a final historical resonance is brought into play, for it brings to mind the legend of Saint Genesius, the patron saint of actors, who played the role of a Christian martyr for the emperor Diocletian but, through divine intervention, found he had actually been converted by the end of his performance, causing him to suffer the fate of his character: "a real martyrdom on the very stage on which he had just been prepared to fake it" (Egginton 1). This in turn conjures up another story, possibly real, possibly an early modern urban legend. It is said that, during a performance of *Judith and Holophernes* in 1549 in Tournai, the actor playing Holophernes was actually killed during the performance. The actor playing the part was in fact a man condemned to death and he is said to have accepted the part, knowing it would kill him, because he speculated on the actress playing Judith not having the stomach to actually perform his murder on the stage. He might survive his execution after all. Unluckily for him, his executioners had also thought of this possibility and had the actress replaced by a young

male convict, promising him a reprieve of punishment if he would don the dress and do the deed. Needless to say, blood was shed and (the actor playing) Holophernes left the stage feet first (Biet 86-87). Whether the story is authentic or not (historical attestation is absent), it clearly illustrates the games baroque theatre liked to play with the appearance of reality and the reality of appearance (but, in any case, Ms Millais-Scott seems to have made it through the filming unscathed). In *Salome's Last Dance* Russell has used these baroque tropes to the full, generating a wealth of resonances that mirror each other endlessly. Like a baroque magician, or a Prospero conjuring up the baseless fabric of cardboard palaces peopled with leering tetrarchs and diamond-studded vixens, Russell directs *Salome's Last Dance* as a luxurious hall of mirrors where every character hides another. The reality lurking behind the screens of this performance, perceived only in flashes, is the man pulling the scarlet threads that keep the film, the play, and the general revelry of these moonstruck follies in check. If and when he shows himself, he appears masked and veiled. But there is truth in masks: whichever way you play it, the illusion is always real. Whatever Russell (allows us to think he) is, he is through his work.

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