

REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW

Women In Love

Ken Russell's *Women in Love* is not only an adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's novel, but also a commentary on it; and, although this method leads Russell into some pitfalls, it is also his essential strength: his film draws power from Lawrence's passion, and also has a life of its own, a critical distance from the novel.

Russell's method is elliptic. He has no respect for the dramatic structure of the novel, but instead sees it as a series of high points which reveal not only character, setting, and theme, but also the original author himself. Russell's approach to *Women in Love* is an extension of the method he has used in his series of biographical documentaries for the BBC. For his documentaries of composers (Debussy, Elgar, Delius, Strauss), Russell would thoroughly research his subjects, and then make a film which was essentially a critique of their music. Russell encountered certain obvious difficulties in applying this method to Lawrence's *Women in Love*: one, the novel concerned at least four primarily characters, not a single individual, and, two, the novel was already a statement in itself, in the way a composition cannot be.

Above all, Russell's method is based on trust; the viewer has faith in his approach primarily because Russell seems to know the novel so well. His selection is impeccable; he has chosen the most significant — symbolic as well as dialectic — passages. Normally, screen adaptations of great literature bring out the schoolmarm in the intelligent viewer: he feels impelled to protect the memory of the author from the philistines and Bowdlerizers out for the money that prestige can bring. The viewer's trust is due to the fact that Russell is aware of both Lawrence's strengths and weaknesses, and uses both as such.

Lawrence's strength, and the strength Russell chooses to convey, was his enormous passion, at once both brute and cerebral, which made him, as T. S. Eliot said, a burning oil slick on the calm British seas. Russell treats the brute side of the Lawrentian passion as Lawrence does, with grand metaphors and pastoral symbolism, and his most effective metaphors, like Lawrence's, involve animals. Gerald spurring his mare to stand at the railroad crossing, Gundrun dancing before the Highland cattle, Gerald and Gundrun courting over a speckled rabbit — these metaphors are perhaps even more powerful on film than in print, because one actually sees the blood spurting from the white underbelly of the mare, and hears the roar of the passing locomotive.

The passion in *Women in Love* revolves around two of Lawrence's great themes: the sanctity of sexual experience, and an accompanying death wish. Russell's sympathy for the brutish passion of these themes allows him to use melodramatic devices which are otherwise clichés. The film's melodramatic conventions — the cascading background music, the dramatic gestures (Gerald throwing a drinking glass into the fireplace), the ornate camerawork (shooting a conversation through a succession of mirrors) — were rightfully out of place in Amer-

ican romances, but here they seem nearer their source: the passion is genuine, and the gestures, if anything, are insufficient. When handling Lawrence's major metaphors, Russell seemingly has no shame. He brazenly intercuts between the discovery of the intertwined bodies of a drowned pair of lovers and Birkin and Ursula's first sexual encounter, between Gerald's father's funeral and Gerald's first sex experience with Gundrun. Russell conspicuously contracts the open-air, sun-lit sexual relations of Birkin and Ursula with the closeted, nocturnal relations of Gerald and Gundrun. Russell's method pulls out all the stops, and that, he seems to say, is the only way to play an *appassionato* author.

The cerebral side of Lawrence's passion, on the other hand, gets a shorter shrift on film than in print, probably because the film is best equipped to portray grand visual metaphors, and the novel best equipped to discuss ideas. For the most part the viewer watches but does not join in the dialectic debate Lawrence's characters can derive from any circumstance. The best scene in *Women in Love* (and one of the best in recent films), however, is one which portrays precisely Lawrence's cerebral passion. As Birkin and Gerald wrestle in the nude, they debate the idea of masculine love, a love as immortal and meaningful as the love between a man and a woman. The scene is played full baroque: a raging fireplace, dark and golden shadows reflecting off the sweaty bodies, monstrous thuds and silences. It is a *tour de force* gesture because it handles a male nudity scene (especially at a time when audiences are so "up" for homosexuality) in rich decadent decor, and by the very audaciousness of it causes the

spectator to concentrate on the content of the debate.

Russell uses the same exaggeratory method with Lawrence's weaknesses as with Lawrence's strengths. He merely shifts his directorial weight, and overplays the drama in the other direction. It is not satire; but by pressing Lawrence's premises, Russell demonstrates that Lawrence's strengths and weaknesses are intertwined, and that Lawrence was often asking the wrong questions, expecting the wrong pleasures. As Russell slowly puts the pressure on Lawrence's passion, the passion at first is powerful and affecting, and later falls into a perspective in which aspects of the passion seem dated and foolish.

Lawrence's most obvious weakness is his hoary Freudianism "Let us hesitate," Lawrence wrote in the 1919 Foreword to *Women in Love*, "no longer to announce that the sensual passions and mysteries are equally sacred with the spiritual mysteries and passions." Modern audiences won't hesitate on that statement, they'll choke on it, and it would have been relatively easy for a lesser director to play Lawrence as a Freudian Pantalone with his sexual metaphors flopping foolishly about. Russell's *appassionato* direction throws Lawrence's sexuality in a double light. Firstly, the sexuality is valid because it informs the passion, and, secondly, it is dated because it is inferior to the passion itself. Birkin's perpetual search for two types of love becomes, under Russell's direction, less important than the desire which drives the quest. In this manner, Russell treats *Women in Love* as a poignant period piece, in idea as well as fashion. Lawrence's inquiry is valid within his con-



text, Russell demonstrates, and then goes on to throw it out of context.

One of the ways Russell undermines Lawrence's love-as-religion theme is by undercutting Lawrence's own attitude toward *Women in Love*. After completing the novel, Lawrence wrote: "The book frightens me: it's so end-of-the-world." Russell's direction contends that *Women in Love*, rather than being pessimistic or nihilistic in any contemporary manner, is boldly life-affirming. Russell adapts *Women in Love* as a Romantic novel, using Lawrence's seriousness and pessimism to set it in perspective.

A concrete example of Russell's process of exaggeration and Romanticization can be seen in his treatment of landscape. Russell's use of landscape, as we have seen, is brazenly symbolic: lush green and gold fields are contrasted with dingy black coal mines. But as the lives of the characters become increasingly gloomy, the landscape becomes increasingly Romantic. Russell uses the Swiss snows not as Lawrence did, for its lifeless quality, but instead as something beautiful and empathetic. Gundrun, Gerald, Birkin, and Loerke have frictioned, frustrated conversations — and the Matterhorn looms majestically behind every shot. (Russell seems to use the Matterhorn in the context of Byron's definition of Romanticism: "High mountains are a feeling.") When, in the film, Gerald wanders off to a beautiful, aesthetic death in the snow, it signifies nothing lost, nothing pessimistic, but, if anything, a perspective to be gained by the modern viewer.

The character of Birkin has always been thought to contain a good deal of D. H. Law-

rence, and Russell emphasizes this similarity by making Alan Bates (as Birkin) look like Lawrence. In this manner, *Women in Love* becomes, like Russell's composer biographies, the story of one man whom Russell can interpret. Birkin is not only Lawrence's comment on love and sexuality, but Russell's comment on Lawrence. The final image of Birkin is also of Lawrence: a transitory figure who Romantically affirmed life, despaired of it, and in both was unable to get the satisfaction he demanded.

Russell's *appassionato* method leads him into some unfortunate editorial jazziness and some failed attempts at broad comedy, but, all things considered, fulfills the viewer's trust and is the most successful adaptation of a Lawrence novel to the screen. Jack Cardiff's *Sons and Lovers* took the "literary classic" approach with emphasis on argument and was unwilling or unable (considering censorship, probably the latter) to venture into Lawrence's passion. Mark Rydell's *The Fox* attempted to make Lawrence's sexuality and symbolism relevant, with understandably disastrous results.

Russell's method, successful in *Women in Love*, is not necessarily applicable to any other work of literature. Literary adaptations have a high casualty rate and the few which succeed in being honest with both their source and themselves are individual phenomenons — Kubrick's *Lolita*, Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, Olivier's *Henry V* — and have a high casualty rate and the few tradition, Russell has carved out a place where only he can stand. ★

—P.S.

