

# THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF FILMING IBSEN

Melvin Chen

*To Penelope, Astrid and Jon*

‘The cinema is not an art which films life: the cinema is something between art and life. Unlike painting and literature, the cinema both gives to life and takes from it, and I try to render this concept in my films. Literature and painting both exist as art from the very start; the cinema doesn’t.’

- Jean-Luc Godard

## 1. The Shakespeare Premise

Some Ibsen purists might harp about the impossibility of filming Ibsen, citing a paucity of notable filmed versions of Ibsen. This article, however, takes as its basic premise the very possibility that great film adaptations might arise from great dramatic texts. One need look no further than great film adaptations of Shakespearean drama, among others Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) and Orson Welles’ *Chimes at Midnight* (1966). These are films worthy of being considered in their own right as works of aesthetic merit. Since the premise that great dramatic texts might be adapted into great films is empirically grounded in the case of Shakespeare, I will call it the “Shakespeare premise”.

Before we consider the plays of Ibsen and the filmed versions of these plays, let us ground our discussion in some theory of art.<sup>1</sup> Art takes the form of an organism, and it perpetuates itself chiefly through two *modi operandi*. The first of these is the way of boldness, which consists in expanding the horizons of possibility of the organic whole. The second of these is the way of intertextuality, which consists in relating the various parts to the organic whole. Here, we have art as an organism justifying itself and its own existence to itself, much after the manner of the Spinozan *conatus*. The different parts may connote either different media (the film medium and the theatrical medium) or different artifacts (the film artifact of George Schaefer’s *An Enemy of the People* (1977) as opposed to the theatrical artifact of Johannes Brun’s Christiania Theatre production). These two *modi operandi* are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as it is possible to be at once both bold and intertextual. Here, I am thinking of course of filmed adaptations of Ibsen’s plays, which are at once both faithful in the nature of their intertextual referentiality and bold in their departure from the original source-text.

When empirically considering film adaptations of Ibsen, however, one is struck by the paucity of films capable of fulfilling the Shakespeare premise, hence the impetus of the purist argument. In the 1998 seminar *Ibsen on Screen*, organized by the Centre for Ibsen Studies and the Norwegian film institute, Astrid Sæther makes precisely such an

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, I am chiefly influenced by the Hegel-inspired theory of absolute idealism that has framed aesthetic discussions in the course of the twentieth century

admission: 'Films based on Ibsen plays have been made since 1916, yet very few of them have been of any significance in the history of film' (Holst & Sæther, 2000, p. 10). That the Shakespeare premise remains a possibility, not altogether to be ruled out, for film adaptations of Ibsen, is denoted by my use of brackets in the title of my proposal. That the act of adapting Ibsen's dramatic text to film remains at the same time a challenge, however, is connoted by the tension between the ontological realms of the possible and the impossible, separated by these merest of linguistic markers.

## 2. The True Nature of the Antithetical

Cinema has been described as the seventh art in Ricciotto Canudo's 'Reflections on the Seventh Art' (1923). He was of course alluding to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), where Hegel listed the five ancient arts as sculpture, architecture, painting, poetry and music. Having initially named cinema, which he regarded as a synthesis of the other five Hegelian art forms, as the sixth art (Canudo, 1911), Canudo subsequently revised his position, taking dance into account as the sixth art. Whether cinema constitutes the sixth or the seventh art, it has become critically commonplace to acknowledge the artistic status of this medium. *Apropos* of filmed versions of Ibsen, this observation begs the question of the immediate relation between cinema and its sister art, the theatre. Debate about whether the invention of photography has made realist painting irrelevant, and whether the invention of film has likewise dealt theatre its death-knell, tends to conceive the relation between these sister arts in strictly antithetical terms. Erwin Panofsky's otherwise incisive 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures' (1946) founders on this assumption: he treats film and theatre as antithetically related, stressing the origins of cinema in the simple endowment of stationary images with the illusion of motion, with the narrative element absent. From this, it is but a plausible step to the thesis that the history of cinema is the 'history of its emancipation from theatrical models' (Sontag, 1966, p. 24).

Against Panofsky's thesis of strict antithesis, it might be more productive to consider the belatedness of cinema as the seventh art, and the implications this might have on its relation to theatre. As is well known, the medium of film developed during the era of late Ibsen, from the 1890s to the twentieth century, following the documentaries of Lumière and the cinema of illusion of Méliès. Harold Bloom, in his theory of antithetical criticism outlined in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), proposes an anxiety of influence between the young poet or *ephebe* and his powerful precursor. Both Bloom and Panofsky, then, agree that the relation across time between different works of art is antithetical in nature. Where they differ, however, is more significant: whereas antithesis implies mutual exclusivity for Panofsky, for Bloom antithesis need not necessarily be a bad thing. Indeed, Bloom speaks of the anxiety of influence as a natural condition, concerning all latecomers who have been denied the natural priority due to the precursor (Bloom, 1973, p. 9). As the seventh art, film is the latecomer, denied the natural priority of theatre, many of whose works have already been granted canonical status. In Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1995), to be certain, Shakespeare's canonical status is cemented in the aristocratic age, as is Ibsen's in the democratic age. The natural

condition of antithesis is turned toward productive ends through Bloom's revisionary ratios, and what holds between late-coming poets and their powerful precursors holds equally between late-coming arts and their powerful precursors.

That there exists a natural Bloomian impulse of film toward redactions of dramatic texts cannot be sufficiently overstated. These dramatic texts have both natural priority and canonical prestige, and films, while they cannot hope to wrest away the former, can at least aspire toward the latter. It should be further borne in mind that film, burdened both by the tyranny of time and the ontology of automatism (chiefly of the camera, stripped of artistic intention), cannot help to look toward theatre as toward a rich cousin. Film adaptations of Ibsen, then, are to be expected, insofar as Ibsen offers the immediate trappings of prestige and natural priority, which the filmmakers tend aspire to fulfill in their own work. Bazin (1958-62, p. 57) cites the circus, provincial theatre and music hall origins of film, while Maureen Thomas refers to the 'fairground roots of cinema' (Holst & Sæther, 2000, p. 18).

### 3. Sister Arts: Cinema as the Revivifier of Theatre

Central to the possibility of filming Ibsen in such a way that the Shakespeare premise might be fulfilled is the notion of the 'sister arts'. A knowledge of Ibsen's plays will demonstrate that this notion was not entirely foreign to the Norwegian playwright: he portrays the Ekdal family (or some of its members, at least) working at photography in *The Wild Duck* (1884), Lyngstrand and Ballestad working respectively at sculpture and painting in *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and much of the action in *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) revolves around the sculpture of Arnold Rubek. Lest we forget, Ibsen himself, besides writing plays, also wrote poetry and painted in his spare time, thereby exemplifying this notion of the sister arts. In her consideration of the visual culture of Ibsen, Toril Moi (2008) casts theatre and painting as sister arts, and examines the influence that *tableaux vivants* might have had on the formalism of Ibsen. There is nothing to prevent us from likewise casting theatre and film as sister arts, from whose basic relation of antithesis new works of art can nonetheless be produced. This is not at the same time to adhere completely what Bazin calls the 'myth of total cinema', which recommends the breaking down of distinctions between genres of art, in favour of synaesthesia (Bazin, 1958-62, pp. 17-22). As Sontag (1966, p. 35) has pointed out, this would be to capitulate to one of the two radical positions in the arts today, the other being the maintenance and clarification of boundaries between the various arts. Rather, the successful film adaptation, as might be seen in the Shakespeare premise, is an indicator of the relative health of each of these arts, capable of producing works of aesthetic merit without at the same time being limited by the formal constraints of mutual exclusivity (Panofsky's thesis of strict antithesis) or total inclusivity (Bazin's myth of total cinema). Good filmed versions of Ibsen, in their outlook and structure, would thus be closer to what Bazin (1958-62, pp. 53-75) calls 'mixed cinema'.

#### 4. Developing Aesthetic Principles for Adapting Ibsen

Given that film and theatre constitute sister arts, let us consider the ways in which film adaptations might expand the dramatic possibilities of dramatic texts. Panofsky (1934/1936, pp. 154-5) calls this the ‘dynamization of space’ and the ‘spatialization of time,’ which he associates with the movability of the camera lens, *vis-à-vis* the static nature of the theatrical stage. The invention of the soundtrack from 1928 onwards, the movie close-up and the use of montage are but some examples of the technical means at the disposal of the film medium, which might not necessarily be employable in the theatrical medium. Indeed, Raymond Williams (1971) observes that the sequence of dramatic imagery in *Peer Gynt* (1867) is realizable within the technical possibilities of the film medium, whereas it might not have been in the nineteenth-century theatre of Ibsen. While concerned with developing aesthetic principles for adapting Ibsen with a view to fulfilling the Shakespeare premise, aesthetic demands have in turn to pay careful attention to the technical demands of the dramatic text. For example, Asbjørn Aarseth’s discussion of the use of *teichoscopy* in *The Master Builder* (1892) demonstrates how a technical aspect of theatre might not translate so well into the terms of the film medium (Aarseth, 2000, pp. 38-51). Aesthetic principles remain under the sway of the technical demands and limitations of the various media, and any good film adaptation of Ibsen should remain aware of what Aarseth has termed these ‘constitutional difficulties’.

Furthermore, a few aesthetic principles might be laid in place with respect to filmed versions of Ibsen. First and foremost, there is a need to avoid the canned theatre effect, which can only be described as a cardinal sin in filming Ibsen. Panofsky’s assumptions about the strict antithesis between film and theatre represent a species of purism with respect to the cinema. Purism rules dogmatically against the ‘heresy of filmed theatre’ and ‘canned theatre’, just as it, with equal measure, has in the past ruled in favour of the golden age of silent film. Nonetheless, Panofsky’s purism does contain a silver lining, insofar as it warns potential film-makers against reducing filmed versions of Ibsen to canned theatre. Elijah Moshinsky’s *Ghosts* (1986), despite its stellar cast of Dame Judi Dench, Kenneth Branagh and Natasha Richardson, undoubtedly suffers from this canned theatre effect. Another case in point would be Michael Elliot’s *Brand* (1959), whose aesthetic merit suffers in its transposition from the stage at Hammersmith to the screen, as part of the BBC World Theatre Series. Canned theatre represents a flattening out of the aesthetic possibilities from stage to screen, and often fails to fully employ the technical merits peculiar to the film medium.

Secondly, there is a need to avoid reducing Ibsen to a cultural commodity. Ferran Audí’s *The Frost* (2008) mistakenly plays up Ibsen’s Norwegian heritage with opening and closing shots of the Norwegian fjords and a 17e Mai encounter between Raul and Asta. One is left, however, with the sense that there has been an overkill on behalf of the Norwegian tourism industry. Thirdly, there is a need to respect the difference between the technical and the aesthetic: technical value need not be coeval with aesthetic value. A key technical difference – with its attendant aesthetic implications – between film and theatre is that whereas theatre employs a fixed point of view, film employs a roving perspective. Film and voyeurism, on this account, are close bedfellows. Tancred Ibsen’s

*Vildanden* (1963) attempts to exploit this technical possibility by taking us into the loft, an imaginative space left elided by his grandfather, a move akin to Alex Segal's *Hedda Gabler* (1962) bringing us to the scene of Lovborg reading his manuscript at the stag-party. Tancred Ibsen's decision to represent this loft, however, should be interpreted as an aesthetic defect, insofar as it fails to respect the dualism between appearance and reality, between Gregers' ideal and Dr Relling's life-lie. To collapse this key distinction in Ibsen in favour of exploring the technical possibilities of the film camera is to confuse technical merit with aesthetic value.

As both the drama of Ibsen and their film adaptations are works of the imagination, something remains to be said about the nature of the imagination. Cavell (1979), working on the premises of the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein and Austin, proposes that the imagination is projective in nature. Just as any philosophical appeal to language – Wittgensteinian, Austinian, or otherwise – involves responding to imagined situations, the prospective film-maker is greeted with an invitation to 'imagine a context' (Cavell, 1979, p. 154) within each dramatic text of Ibsen. As with the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein and Austin, not just any projection will do. Rather, the 'object or activity or event onto or into which a concept is projected, must invite or allow that projection' (Cavell, 1979, p. 183). To return to our Hegelian theory of art, intertextuality describes the filmmaker's acceptance of Ibsen's invitation to project from the context of his drama. Boldness describes how that filmmaker might project the drama of Ibsen onto new objects and contexts, as is the case, for instance, with Hallvard Bræin's ground-breaking *Gatas Gynt* (2008), which projects the fifth act of *Peer Gynt* onto the contemporary context of the homeless people of Oslo. One might well argue that the narrative of Peer's homecoming from the north African deserts to Norway, dispossessed and in desperate need of soul-searching, invites and tolerates precisely such a projection, deviant though it might first appear to be. Film adaptations of Ibsen are in dire need of such bold projections as Bræin (2008) has endeavoured, without, at the same time, veering wildly off course by foisting onto Ibsen projections that cannot conceivably have been invited.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, my article about the (im)possibility of filming Ibsen begins as a near-impossibility, which I attribute, along with Sæther, to the paucity of good films on Ibsen. That great film adaptations might arise from great dramatic texts cannot be immediately premised in Ibsen, but rather in Shakespeare. Cinema may be regarded as the seventh art, a sister art of the theatre, *contra* Panofsky's thesis of strict antithesis. Drawing on Bloom, my thesis demonstrates how film seeks to transcend its circus fairground and music hall roots by aspiring toward theatre, whose dramatic texts have both natural priority and canonical prestige. This makes film adaptations of Ibsen both a natural impulse and an aesthetic challenge. Following my defence of the notion of the sister arts, which I regard to be close kin to Bazin's defence of mixed cinema, sound aesthetic principles which may be employed for adapting Ibsen in film should be sought after, albeit in less modest a manner than I have contrived. At all times, the film of Ibsen that

my thesis has in mind is a film-in-the-making, as yet unrealized, capable of upholding upon its realization the Shakespeare premise, and thereafter turning great film adaptations of Ibsen's drama a critical commonplace. That day remains yet on the horizon.

### References

- Asbjørn Aarseth. "Drama in the Narrow Room. *Teichoscopy* as a Constitutional Difficulty in the Ibsen Film," in: *Ibsen on Screen*, ed. Jan Erik Holst & Astrid Sæther. Oslo: The Centre for Ibsen Studies & The Norwegian Film Institute 2007, 38-51
- André Bazin. *What is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray. Los Angeles & London: University of California Press 1967.
- Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press 1973.  
*The Western Canon: The Books & Schools of the Ages*. London: Macmillan 1995.
- Ricciotto Canudo. "Reflections on the Seventh Art," in: *French Film Theory & Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel, Vol. 1, 2 vol.s. Princeton University Press 1993, 291-303  
 "The Birth of a Sixth Art," in: *French Film Theory & Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel, Vol. 1, 2 vol.s. Princeton University Press 1993, 58-65
- Stanley Cavell. *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press 1979.
- G. W. F. Hegel. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vol.s. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975.
- Jan Erik Holst & Astrid Sæther, ed. *Ibsen on Screen*. Oslo: The Centre for Ibsen Studies & The Norwegian Film Institute 2000.
- Toril Moi. *Henrik Ibsen & The Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.
- Erwin Panofsky. "Style & Medium in the Motion Pictures," in: *Film Theory & Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast & Marshall Cohen. New York; London; Toronto: Oxford University Press 1974, 151-69
- Susan Sontag. "Film & Theatre," in: *The Tulane Drama Review* 11 (1), The MIT Press 1966, 24-37

Raymond Williams. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. London: Hogarth Press 1971.

### Summary

This article begins by taking the paucity of good filmed versions of Ibsen as an empirical fact or a given, as it were. It then introduces the Shakespeare premise, which it proceeds to adopt as valid. This opens up the possible conclusion that great film adaptations might arise from great dramatic texts, a possibility strengthened by my second premise that cinema and theatre constitute sister arts, particularly in the Bazinian realm of mixed cinema. At the same time, the Shakespeare premise allows me to suspend the immediate conclusion that it is impossible to make great filmed versions of Ibsen, a suspension of judgment reflected in the use of brackets in the title of my article. After dispensing with Panofsky's thesis of strict antithesis as a false premise, I adopt a Bloomian framework to discuss how plays by Ibsen may be adapted so as to fulfil the Shakespeare premise. I consider how aesthetic principles may be developed so as to aid the potential film-maker who is likewise driven by the Shakespeare premise and the concomitant hidden potential in Ibsen, whose dramatic texts share the natural priority and canonical prestige of Shakespeare's texts. My final conclusion remains open-ended but positive: the day in which filmed versions of Ibsen might fulfil the Shakespeare premise with ease remains on the horizon, although my discussion will – I hope – have gone some way in helping bring that film-in-the-making into fruition.

### Short Biography

Name: Melvin Chen

Academic Title: Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy

Occupation: Research Associate (Perrett Laver, London)

Affiliation: Cardiff University

Degrees Attained: M.A. in Ibsen Studies (University of Oslo); B.A. with Merit in Literature in English (National University of Singapore)

E-mail: [ChenM8@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ChenM8@cardiff.ac.uk)

Research Interests: Philosophy, Environmental Law, Literature, Film Theory, Bibliometrics

**Melvin Chen** has published poetry in *Tipton Poetry Journal* and philosophical papers in the *Journal of General Philosophy*, *Philosophical Forum*, *Antae*, and *Filosofisk Supplement*. In addition, he has two article-length manuscripts (forthcoming) that are due to be published in the *Southern Journal of Philosophy* and *Philosophy & Literature*, and another on a revise-and-resubmit with *Hypatia*. He is also a Reviewer for the *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*.

### Keywords

Film; Ibsen; Shakespeare premise; Bloom; Panofsky; Bazin; Canudo; sister arts