

POST-SECULAR SALVATION: HALLVARD BRÆIN'S *GATAS GYNT*

Ellen Rees

Perhaps more than any other adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867), Hallvard Bræin's hour-long movie *Gatas Gynt* (*Peer Gynt of the Streets*, 2008) implicates the audience in Peer's existential suffering. The made-for-television film, which was developed in collaboration with the Salvation Army in Norway is a dramatization of just the fifth act of *Peer Gynt* using amateur actors who are also homeless people struggling with drug addiction. The film was broadcast on Norwegian television on Easter Sunday 2008. The connection to Easter is by no means coincidental, as this is an interpretation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* for which the rhetoric of salvation is absolutely central. It is, however, a post-secular form of salvation that rejects what John A. McClure calls the dogmatic "forms of repression and control" of religious institutions (McClure, 1995, 152), and instead explores in an open-ended way salvation as a sacred experience grounded in compassion for the individual and community integration.

Our current era is marked by what Jürgen Habermas and other scholars have labeled "post-secularism," a widespread turning away from both secular and traditional religious discourses toward a more personal and subjective search for new ways of creating meaning (Habermas, 2008). I shall argue here that the contents of *Gatas Gynt* are presented to the viewers as only indirectly informed by religious discourse, but that its production, marketing and distribution history indicate that the film is actually quite firmly grounded in institutionalized Christianity. Considered in terms of the approach outlined in Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), then, this adaptation analysis focuses on the implications of the "who" (the particular set of actors, the director, the Salvation Army), the "what" (only the fifth act of *Peer Gynt*), the "where" (the fringes of Oslo populated by the homeless), and the "when" (contemporary late modern society, Easter) of adaptation in order to find answers to "why" (the social message of the film, the complicated signals it sends about the role of organized religion).

Gatas Gynt combines documentary footage of rehearsals and filming, extensive interviews with the actors, and dramatic sequences that depict major scenes from the fifth act. The documentary segments serve to give an impression of the personalities of the amateur actors. This is an attempt on the part of the filmmakers to counteract the fact that the homeless so often become socially invisible. Many of their statements about themselves relate thematically to Peer's confrontation with himself in Ibsen's text. Bræin explains, "The meeting with his own conscience, the balancing on the edge of death, knowing that death touches you. That is what the people of the street are often confronted with" (cited in Jørgensen, 2008, 74).¹ In *Gatas Gynt*, suffering prompts empathy rather than judgment, as we see most clearly in Synnøve Søberg's brilliantly simple and selfless portrayal of Solvejg. For Bræin then, these amateur actors have a far more immediate connection to the existential core and ironic truths of *Peer Gynt* than the rest of us.

It is not until the seventh minute that the title of the film, *Gatas Gynt*, actually appears on the screen. During the unusually long pre-title sequence the film's

premise and participants are established. We see the well-known professional actor Sven Nordin instructing the amateur actors, as well as interview clips showing them as they reflect on how their characters should look, and a “behind the scenes” segment that shows one of the actors exploding in frustration during filming. Although the actors are not identified by anything but the names of their characters, this introductory sequence serves to establish empathy on the part of the viewer. These “people of the street” as Bræin calls them are depicted as engaged, thinking individuals, despite whatever physical infirmities and substance abuse problems they may have. The film thus creates an opportunity for this marginalized group of people to claim a new, “double” voice. Not only do they take part in the hegemonic voice of the nation through performing Norway’s national epos; in the interview sequences their commentary puts them in the role of the “expert” who shapes the way that epos is interpreted within the larger community.

Christopher Grøndahl, who is more widely known for his screenplays for the thrillers *Villmark* (2003, *Dark Woods*) and *Nokas* (2010), wrote the screenplay for *Gatas Gynt*. The dramatic sequences make up about thirty-five of the film’s fifty-eight minute run time. During the first dramatic sequence, introduced by the “Gatas Gynt” intertitle, we see Peer wandering across what appears to be a sand dune. A voice-over narrates the following text—written by Grøndahl as a summary of Peer’s life before the fifth act—as Peer makes his way across the sand:

In this story we meet a man who was born to greatness. But his family lost everything, both farm and land. He learned early to lie, brag and make things up. Hated by the people and hunted down by the law, he betrayed love and fled abroad. He remained a liar and an egotist. And out in the wide world he made money off of other people’s misfortune. Like an emperor of the self he returned home many years later. He lost everything abroad, and, now poor, he is on his way home after many years, where, with death as his shadow, he will meet his past, his conscience, and, at last, his love. (Bræin and Grøndahl, 2008).²

This voice-over glossing of the first four acts of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* ends evocatively with a paraphrase of Solvejg’s famous statement “In my faith, in my hope, and in my love” (Ibsen, 1972, 421).³ The scene is followed immediately by an interview with the actor who plays Peer, Egil Schønhardt, who comments broadly on the postmodern condition, speaking about trust, both in terms of individual and national relations in a global context. He reproaches Norway for having breached the trust it once enjoyed, and speaks of how easily trust is destroyed. This interview is in turn followed by a sequence in which Sjøberg reflects over the character Solvejg’s ability to forgive, which Sjøberg also recognizes in herself, and which emphasizes the balance between Peer’s search for forgiveness and Solvejg’s empathy and willingness to forgive.

Grøndahl’s summary presents the viewer with a version of Peer who is radically disconnected from his past. In opposition to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, which revels almost gleefully in the misdeeds of Peer, in *Gatas Gynt*, what Peer has done or not done is less important than the fact that he is now, late in life, working his way

home and actively seeking salvation. In the film, salvation operates largely independently of religious dogma. By shifting attention to the person Peer is only after he has begun to atone, *Gatas Gynt* essentially discourages the viewer from judging whatever self-destructive and criminal things he may have done in his past, and encourages an unconditional acceptance of the person he is now.

Likewise, in Synnøve Sørberg we discover a similarly complex Solvejg who is neither what Camilla Collett in the essay “Fædrelandske Forfattere” dismissed as an insipid embodiment of hopeless longing (“National Authors”; Collett, 1993, 147), nor Sigrid Undset’s idealization of her as the “most radical” woman in all of Norwegian literature (cited in Nilsen, 1967, 116). Sørberg’s portrayal of Solvejg exhibits deep self-knowledge, while at the same time she remains trapped within negative patterns of behaviour. In an interview sequence, Sørberg describes Solvejg’s motivations in the simplest of terms: “She sees that he comes back tired. I think I probably would have made sure that he was taken care of for the rest of his time, at least” (Bræin and Grøndahl, 2008).⁴ This suggests qualities of profound kindness, empathy and human decency rather than the almost incomprehensible infatuation with and idealization of Peer that is often displayed in portrayals of Solvejg. The fact that the amateur actor is obviously ravaged by the struggles that she has undergone deepens Solvejg as a character, as does the documentary scene in which Sørberg counsels another actor through an episode of drug craving.

Bræin implicates viewers directly in the personal stories of suffering that the actors recount in the interview sequences. He draws attention to our willingness to live in a society of individualistic “haves” that allows for and indeed is predicated upon an underclass of “have nots.” We are all, Bræin suggests, the lying, unscrupulous and self-serving Peer:

The Western world is right in the middle of the third or fourth act of *Peer Gynt*, where Peer is at his most vulgar, and ends up in a madhouse. I think we’ve become so obsessed with money that we don’t realize that we’re about to damage ourselves in the single-minded pursuit of profit. In the cutthroat competition there are many who crash and fall to the wayside, and then one isn’t accepted. And that’s where *Peer Gynt* comes in, in the fifth act (cited in Jørgensen, 2008, 74).⁵

In this adaptation Peer has perhaps fallen hardest and farthest of any Peer in the performance history of *Peer Gynt* by the time the fifth act commences. We see this manifested in Schönhardt’s weathered, emaciated and stooped body. But, significantly, everyone else in the community that Peer returns to is broken too, and here Bræin makes a departure from tradition. Whereas an alienated Peer is usually contrasted with an integrated and intact community in performances of the play, by eliminating this distinction between Peer and the community to which he returns, Bræin suggests that we are all a part of the degradation and corruption of the fourth act, and that we are all in need of salvation.

The dramatic action takes place for the most part at exterior locations in Oslo that create associations with the transitory nature of homelessness. Peer encounters the Strange Passenger along a road in what appears to be an industrial area. He

reflects over the layers of the onion in what looks like the open first floor of a large building that is under construction. Plastic sheeting, a wheelbarrow, and dripping water emphasize the temporary and uncomfortable nature of this setting. Peer first meets the Button-Moulder at a subway station, and the Troll King confronts Peer aboard a ransacked subway train. The Thin Man appears in a kind of wasteland between the subway station and old industrial buildings. The interview sequences with the actors are in many instances filmed at their “camps,” giving the viewer insight into their living situations. These locations merge seamlessly with the settings of the dramatic sequences.

Bræin chooses to conclude the dramatic action within the confines of a church. Norwegian director Bentein Baardson also did this in his 1993 television adaptation of *Peer Gynt*. Unlike Baardson, who placed Peer and Solvejg spectacularly at the foot of the cross in an unmistakable *pietà* tableau, Bræin has his Peer find Solvejg pragmatically clearing away dishes and washing up in the church kitchen. The final dramatic scene is entirely free of erotic energy and ego. It presents a moment of pure connection between Peer and Solvejg. To the extent that there is a religious message, it is one of community and seeking rather than dogma, and it leaves the ending open in a way that Baardson’s final tableau—which in effect turns Peer into a Christ figure—does not. Rather than fixing the camera on a static *pietà* image as Baardson does, the camera pulls back, and the viewer’s last glimpse of Peer and Solvejg is through the panes of a rain spattered window. Nor is this the last image of the film. As a melancholy tune plays,⁶ the camera pans slowly from the window up to the rainy sky, and Bræin cuts to a series of brief images of the actors relaxing out of character. This final montage sequence serves to situate Peer and Solvejg within a larger community, and to emphasize again the humanity and dignity of a generally ostracized group of people.

Perhaps paradoxically, given the profoundly ambiguous nature of the source text, Bræin’s adaptation of *Peer Gynt* has a clear social message. Through careful selection and recontextualization, he activates Ibsen’s text as a vehicle for spreading the message that homeless people and people suffering from drug addiction are complex human beings with inherent strengths in addition to their more obvious weaknesses. In the public relations campaign for the film Bræin consistently emphasized the resources that the actors brought to the project, while downplaying their failures. The following comment from an interview about the project in *Dagbladet* is typical: “We have had to go out and search for actors at night, but I don’t want to focus on the problems some of the people involved have. It is so easy in our society to feel left out, like a failure, and useless” (cited in Marthinsen, 2008, 50).⁷ If Egil Schønhardt’s portrayal of Peer is successful and convincing, Bræin seems to suggest, it is precisely because he has struggled with drug abuse, not despite it.

The success of *Gatas Gynt* as social commentary is predicated on the perceived authenticity of the actors and their life experiences. Unlike most theatrical and film productions of *Peer Gynt*, this adaptation taps into the rhetorical structures of documentary film and reality television in order to stir the emotions of the viewers and help them identify with the participants. Reality television has become a dominant force during the last twenty or so years of television broadcasting, and it

has also changed the way we think about the production of reality in film (Hill, 2005, 14). Although some of the acting in *Gatas Gynt* is quite convincing, not all of it is, and it is doubtful whether a film consisting only of the dramatic sequences would have had the same impact that the inclusion of the interview sequences, which seek to represent the actual people behind the roles, has had. In these interview sequences the actors also comment explicitly on how the larger society perceive them. The rhetorically constructed identities in *Gatas Gynt*, which flow back and forth between characters and actors, thus resonate with Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which, as we know, questions the very notion of an authentic self or stable identity.

If we turn from the contents of *Gatas Gynt* to a closer examination of extra-filmic concerns such as its production, marketing and distribution history, we find that the film is in fact much more securely grounded in institutionalized Christianity than it appears. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's (NRK) main channel aired *Gatas Gynt* on Easter Sunday. This is a de facto reframing of the final scenes of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which take place during the Pentecost. This formerly key Christian holy day appears to have lost much of its previous significance in contemporary Norway.⁸ Thus the decision to establish an associative link to Easter clearly strengthens the message of specifically Christian salvation that underlies the project.⁹

NRK is a state-controlled broadcasting corporation in a country that, despite recent changes to its constitution, still has a state-funded People's Church ("Folkekirke") headed by the monarch. Religious pluralism is protected by law in Norway, but NRK regularly sends programming with explicitly religious content on Christian holy days, while other belief communities are far less visible. In a "historic decision" in 2008, NRK changed its bylaws to allow for the broadcasting of programs that preached the beliefs of religions other than Christianity for the first time (NRK, 2008, 60). According to NRK's annual report from 2012, only four hours of television programming promoting faiths other than Christianity (three hours allocated specifically to Islam and one to Judaism) were broadcast out of a total of seventy-nine hours of religious programming, or roughly five percent (NRK, 2012, 70).

Furthermore, the Salvation Army was involved at every stage of the planning and execution of the film. Bræin worked together with Salvation Army major Njål Djurhuus from the very conception of the project (Jørgensen, 2008, 74), and Djurhuus was involved in various aspects, from casting to a cameo appearance as the minister presiding over the funeral scene. The Salvation Army's Lighthouse support center for substance abusers, where all the actors were contacted initially, provided transportation and food.

As a part of the public relations campaign for the film, in March 2008 the Salvation Army organized an outdoor screening of *Gatas Gynt* at Youngstorget, the traditional gathering place for demonstrations in Oslo, with King Harald V as the guest of honor. This event can be understood as part of a pattern of public ritual that seeks to inspire Norwegian citizens to reconceptualize their society as heterogeneous and accepting of diversity, rather than as homogeneous and judgmental. The use of a member of the royal family in support of social justice causes is not unique to Norway, and it is perhaps most well known from the late Diana, Princess of Wales'

literal and figurative embracing of AIDS patients in a concerted effort to humanize what had until then been a demonized and ostracized population (Stanovsky, 1999). Although lacking the international appeal and charisma of a figure like the Princess of Wales, the Norwegian monarchy is very popular, and the king still embodies significant symbolic capital. That he agreed to participate in the screening of the film, meeting and mingling with the amateur actors, signaled the monarch's strong support for Bræin's efforts to change attitudes toward the homeless and those suffering from substance abuse (Stokke Nilsen, 2008).

In addition, the location for the screening is also highly evocative. Youngstorget is arguably the most important arena in Norway for public demonstrations, and it is also the symbolic home of the workers' movement and indeed the entire welfare state, since the Labor Party headquarters loom over the square. The Labor Party, in power for most of the twentieth century, built the welfare state from an ideology based on solidarity and participation, the very qualities that Bræin finds lacking in contemporary society (Jørgensen, 2008, 74). That the first public screening of *Gatas Gynt* should be held out-of-doors in Oslo, such that viewers could join the actors in their environment, was a given; that the screening would take place at Youngstorget rather than any of the many other suitable outdoor venues in Oslo strengthens the perception that the film should be understood as a specific critique of the Norwegian welfare state, rather than as purely educational, aesthetic or entertaining.

Habermas defines a post-secular society as one that is undergoing a change of consciousness brought about by a number of factors. He argues that we have collectively become less certain that "modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion" and he observes that "religious organizations are increasingly assuming the role of 'communities of interpretation' in the public arena of secular societies" (Habermas, 2008, 20). On the one hand *Gatas Gynt* represents the Salvation Army as willing and able to take a clear stand on and personalize social problems, while on the other hand the film effectively erases the organization's Christian theology. This, I would argue, exemplifies the kind of ambiguity that characterizes post-secular society. We also see this manifested in the physical presentation of Solvejg, who wears a plain gold cross throughout the film. Viewers cannot know whether the cross belongs to the actor Synnøve Sjøberg personally, or whether it is part of Solvejg's costume, so we are unsure whose rhetorical authority lies behind the presence of this obviously Christian symbol. We as viewers are ultimately free to construe our own associative and perhaps unorthodox connections between the cross and the character's willingness to forgive. It is precisely this kind of unresolved vacillation between secular and sacred discourses that I think marks *Gatas Gynt* as such an evocative example of the post-secular.

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Biographical Note

Ellen Rees (Ph.D. University of Washington, 1995) is an associate professor at the University of Oslo's Centre for Ibsen Studies. Recent books include *Cabins in Modern Norwegian Literature: Negotiating Place and Identity* (2014) and *Ibsen's Peer Gynt and the Production of Meaning* (2014). She has published articles on Nordic cinema and literature in journals such as *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, *Edda*, *Scandinavian Studies*, *Ibsen Studies*, and *Scandinavica*.

Summary

This article considers Hallvard Bræin's 2008 film adaptation of *Peer Gynt* in light of theories of the post-secular. It argues that the film presents a post-secular interpretation of the ambiguous message of salvation at the end of Ibsen's dramatic poem. Through a combination of analysis of the film itself and examination of its production history, the article evaluates to what degree the film expresses a specifically Christian notion of salvation, and suggests that it opens for non-dogmatic interpretations of what salvation might mean, and who exactly is in need of it in the

post-secular era. An examination of the who, what, when, and where of this adaptation (Hutcheon 2006) identifies how the filmmakers use Ibsen's original text as a vehicle for a specific social message regarding the plight of people suffering from substance abuse and homelessness in contemporary Norway.

Keywords

Peer Gynt, Gatas Gynt, film adaptation, post-secularism, identity, homelessness, Salvation Army, drug addiction, social commentary

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Norwegian are my own. "Møtet med sin egen samvittighet, det å balansere på kanten med døden og kjenne at døden tar i deg. Det er det gatefolket ofte konfronteres med."

² "I denne handlingen møter vi en mann som var født til storhet. Men familien hans mistet alt, både gård og grunn. Han lærte tidlig å lyve, skrøne og dikte i hop. Hatet av folket og jaget av loven sviker han kjærligheten og rømmer utenlands. Han forble en løgnhals og en egoist. Og ute i den store verden tjente han penger på andres ulykke. Som selvets keiser vendte han etter mange år hjemover. I utlandet hadde han tapt alt, og fattig er han nå på vei hjem, der han med døden som skygge skal møte sin fortid, sin samvittighet, og til slutt sin kjærlighet."

³ "I min Tro, i mit Haab og i min Kjærlighed" (Ibsen, 2007, 745).

⁴ "Hun ser at han kommer sliten tilbake. Jeg tror nok jeg hadde sørget for at han hadde det bra resten av tida ihvertfall."

⁵ "Ideen ligger i møtet mellom dem og teksten. Den vestlige verden befinner seg midt inne i tredje eller fjerde akt av *Peer Gynt*, hvor Peer er på det mest vulgære og til slutt ender på galehuset. Jeg tror vi er blitt så opptatt av penger at vi ikke skjønner at vi er i ferd med å skade oss selv i tunnelsynet etter egen vinning. I det beinharde kjøret er det mange som krasjer og ramler utenfor, og så blir man ikke akseptert. Og der kommer *Peer Gynt* inn, i femte akt."

⁶ All music for the film was composed by Knut Sævik and Pål Nyhus; celebrity violinist Arve Tellefsen joined lesser-known musicians to record the soundtrack.

⁷ "Vi har måttet finne skuespillere om natta og lete etter dem, men jeg ønsker ikke å fokusere på de problemene en del av de involverte har. Det er så lett i vårt samfunn å føle seg til overs, mislykket og til ingen nytte."

⁸ Dag Kullerud describes the Pentecost as the "unknown" or "forgotten" holy day in contemporary Norway (Kullerud, 2008, 14).

⁹ According to its bylaws, NRK "[...] shall reflect Norway's religious heritage and the diversity of ethical and religious traditions in Norwegian society." NRK does not list *Gatas Gynt* in its list of television programming with religious content in the annual report for 2008 (NRK, 2008, 60-61). This is symptomatic of how deeply embedded Christianity is in public discourse in Norway.