

## BOATS IN FIELDS. UWE JANSON'S *PEER GYNT* (2006)

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Uwe Janson's 2006 TV-film adaptation of *Peer Gynt* was his third theatrical filmatization for television<sup>i</sup> and was billed as a poetic modernization of Ibsen's dramatic poem, as a "Film über die (Un-)Möglichkeit der Liebe" [film about the (im)possibility of love]. With Robert Stadlober in the title role, Susanne-Marie Wrage as Åse, Karoline Herfurth as Solveig, and Ulrich Mühe as the Button-Moulder, the 81-minute long film was shot on Peenemünde on the Western Pomeranian island of Usedom in the Baltic Sea, and it makes extensive use of the local landscape. Unlike Ibsen's Norwegian setting with its high mountains and low valleys, this landscape is characterized by waterways and marshes, lush reed belts, deserted roads and grassy meadows dotted with the dilapidated hulls of disused boats. The symbolic potential of this environment is, as in Ibsen's poem, explored fully and is intensified by the omission of Ibsen's fourth Act, the act that contains the most expansive geographical trajectory that takes Peer from his homeland to Morocco, the Sahara and Egypt.

This trajectory has been interpreted by scholars as a fundamental representation of Peer's self-estrangement or of his flight from reality into his imagination, or sanity into madness.<sup>ii</sup> A more condensed geographic space such as is seen in Janson's piece necessarily risks losing some of the symbolic force of the topography of the poem. Moreover as much of the ironic force and social commentary is contained in Act 4, its omission may further signal a shift away from the anti-romantic interpretive tradition that has been so prevalent since the second half of the twentieth century, especially in countries like Germany where theatre practitioners have embraced ideological readings of Ibsen's poem in the spirit of Bertold Brecht, for example.

In this article, I should like to examine the results of limiting the geographic space of Ibsen's poem with regard to the development of Peer. I will suggest that while Uwe Janson gives Peer's journey less physical materiality, he nevertheless retains the symbolism of the journey in his use of boats. Additionally I will examine how Janson mirrors the self-reflexivity of Ibsen's work and maintains the romantic/anti-romantic dichotomy evident in the poetic text.

Before discussing the film in detail, I must acknowledge that I come to it with a personal hierarchy of text as my appreciation of Janson's film is necessarily coloured by my prior knowledge of Ibsen's poem. While the film historically comes after Ibsen's text, I nevertheless do not want to view it as secondary or derivative in the way that might imply a preference for some kind of "source" text and the necessary inferiority of the secondary work. Moreover, I am not going to judge the degree of fidelity of Janson's film to Ibsen's work as that would be assuming the film only as a reproduction of Ibsen rather than a kind of creative transposition or transcodification.<sup>iii</sup> Working with fidelity as a criterion for evaluation would also necessarily obscure the ways in which the film relates to other possible texts beyond Ibsen's poem, and reduce the palimpsestuous possibilities of the adaptation. It would disregard, for example the German film history

of Ibsen's piece, which, after its translation into German in 1880 by Ludwig Passarge, prompted two early silent films in 1918 and 1920, along with a 1934 film directed by Fritz Wendhausen and starring Hans Albers.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, such an approach may overlook the theatrical production history of *Peer Gynt* in Germany, which has been the foremost country to employ a non-romantic, ideological interpretation of Ibsen's poem, at least since the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>v</sup> Exemplary of that tradition is Peter Stein's acclaimed 1971 Schaubühne production, which highlighted the political and economic implications of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* by utilizing different Brechtian alienation techniques. In line with the tenets of Brecht's Epic Theatre,<sup>vi</sup> Stein made particular use of quotation, whereby actors make the audience conscious of their own awareness of acting a role. With six different actors portraying Peer, each of which switched in and out of role on stage in front of the audience, and a set and props that similarly encouraged a critical distancing to the work, Stein was able to transform Ibsen's text into a Marxist analysis of cultural history.<sup>vii</sup>

While these intertextual possibilities - and there are, of course, many, many more - promise fruitful analyses, the scope of this article unfortunately disallows an analysis of Janson's film with regard to them. Rather, I can show how Janson's adaptation pays homage to both the romantic and anti-romantic traditions of *Peer Gynt* interpretation. The romantic tradition emphasizes Peer as a romantic dreamer whose dreams crystallize into the idealized union with the redemptive Solveig. As with the first stage production in 1876 that was directed by the Swedish Ludvig Josephson at the Christiania Theatre, the lyrical element of the poem outweighs the satirical in such a production. In keeping with Ibsen's own suggestions regarding that premiere,<sup>viii</sup> Janson omits Act IV with the exception of the Anitra scene, which he condenses to an erotic sexual encounter. He thereby eradicates some of the more disturbing dissonances and ironic force of Ibsen's poem. Moreover Janson uses selections from Edvard Grieg's music, written for that very same original production, which as some scholars lament has been an inappropriately rhapsodic score of which the play has never fully succeeded in ridding itself (Marker & Marker, 1989, 10). In so doing he clearly cites the romantic tradition and differentiates his adaptation from other notable German productions.

Nevertheless, the compulsion to romanticize Peer is nuanced by the very self-reflexivity of the film that in its use of camera and montage effect encourages a critical distancing on the part of the viewer. Janson eschews the traditions of realistic filmic narrative such as cause and effect shots or establishing shots that maintain narrative continuity and a clearly defined time line. Rather, the film is set up more as a montage, as a series of episodes that are related only in their repetition of place and/or character. This montage effect is an example of Brechtian technique transposed to film whereby each scene may stand for itself and the trajectory of the piece jumps in curves, thus challenging any linear continuity. The intermittent appearance of the voyeuristic Button Moulder further complicates the narrative continuity and contributes to the roundabout trajectory of both the film and Peer himself as he follows the Boyg's advice to "gaa udenom" (go round and about). 360° shots of Peer and scenes in which other characters revolve around him further support an understanding of Peer's turning, which as Ellen

Rees claims in her article “Tropological Turns in Peer Gynt” (2008) is both physical, ethical and dramaturgical and is emblematic of the text’s own resistance to interpretation. Moreover the circularity of the film is further strengthened as the beginning and ending scenes take place on the same deserted road, thereby supporting an ambiguous reading of the end of the poem if reading it as a journey of self-discovery.

From the opening frames of the adaptation, the spectator is challenged to look beyond the conventional narrative realism of the film’s own naturalistic setting. The first sequence is a visual citation of Ibsen’s first scene in which Åse accuses Peer of lying and thereby brings into question the very veracity of narrative and of Peer himself. As Ibsen’s first scene warns the reader to maintain some critical distance to Peer’s narrative world, so too does Janson’s initial montage. After a shot of light reflected on water, Peer’s head appears floating in water screen right. This shot cuts to an image of geese flying overhead, a long shot of reed banks, then another head shot of Peer looking into the distance, this time with his face obscured by tall reeds. A subsequent shot of light reflected in water over which appears the title of the film, is followed by Peer’s face again, but this time screen left and obscured by long, waving grasses. Peer is looking directly at the viewer although his face is so obscured by the flowing grass that the viewer cannot have a detailed look at him but must rather struggle to define him against the landscape in which he is immersed. A shot of the right side of an intensely watching face screen right, (we only see the eye and cheek resting on clenched hands,) mimics the viewer’s own position before we again see Peer’s face, or rather just one side of it, at the bottom of the screen lying in grass. A shot of the entire face of the watching male, whom we later discover is the Button Moulder, is followed by a shot of Peer walking off screen right, a close-up of a crawling caterpillar on a road, then a long shot of Peer and Åse approaching on that same straight road which is shimmering in the heat as Peer relates his tale of the reindeer ride, a tale whose narrative continuity is undermined by visual discontinuity as the camera cuts to Peer and Åse in different places as the tale is told.

In addition to citing Ibsen’s written text visually, the initial sequence also sets up the symbolic matrix for the film; the close scrutiny given to Peer as dreamer, the landscape as a mitigating factor in how we interpret character, and the deep symbolism of the water and birds in the overall filmic narrative. The attention paid to faces in particular continues throughout the film in close-up shots of eyes, reflections and faces under water or faces obscured by reeds and the landscape itself. The close-ups most often show Peer, Solveig, Åse or the Button Moulder, and while they are not necessarily center-frame, they do suggest an intimate, analytical focus on these characters. Moreover these shots suggest parallels between characters when the frame arrangement is similar. Solveig, for example, is represented in close alignment with Peer not only as she is the only other character besides Peer to interact with Åse, but also as her face is shown in long grasses and she is depicted as a dreamer lying in the meadows looking up at the sky. From her very first meeting with Peer during which Janson cross-cuts to facial close-ups of each character as voice-overs that do not match the faces in each shot deliver the lines about being a troll and a werewolf, an intimate, almost psychic relationship is established between Solveig and the young Gynt.

A similar tactic is used in establishing the relationship between Peer and his mother in that the initial dialogues are filmed as long shots and hence there was no shot counter shot of the characters speaking to each other. Rather than implying an intimacy as with Solveig, such a visualization of dialogue means that the viewer's perception of language as a communication between members of a community is complicated, and the possibility of language as a means of manipulation and ultimately of isolation is opened up. This maintains the critical approach to language, lying and storytelling that we see in Ibsen's poem. The parallels between Solveig and Åse are further underscored when Solveig is depicted in close-up in the family garden with Peer's mother listening to stories about Peer's childhood. Such an intimate affiliation necessarily reinforces an interpretation of Solveig's final lines as a psychological regression to childhood dependency on the part of Peer, an interpretation underscored by the fetal position both Peer and Solveig adopt.

Solveig's close connection to Peer is also represented in several other ways. She, like Peer, is a dreamer and an artist, watching the clouds and birds and creating images of faces and flower patterns in the grass. While waiting for Peer, she makes dozens of white paper boats, one of which she names Peer Gynt, that she plants on reeds into the earth. This visual representation of her waiting serves a dual function. Firstly it shows that while she remains pure and innocent, she is not passively awaiting the return of Peer – indeed she eventually actually decides to go in search of him, and of her own volition meets him on the same deserted road he walked with his mother. There is no *pietà* motif in this final scene and Solveig is not blind, but she rather calls to him with her singing (from Grieg, of course), and lies laughing with him on the road, face to face. The second function of the paper boats is to establish Solveig as a fellow artist who, if we interpret boats as vessels that offer an escape from reality or are a representation of the imagination, as I shall argue for Peer, dreams on a smaller scale that is more firmly rooted in her natural environment.

The importance of boats as a visual representation of Peer's dreams of escape from reality or from himself is developed throughout the film. There is a clear trajectory from small to large vessels and vessels actually moving in the water from one physical point to another to those that are moored, and then even more that are stationary in fields as if washed up. From the upturned rowing boat outside Åse's house at the beginning of the film, to a modern motorboat and the enormous hull of a wooden ship that seems to balance precariously on the earth and upon which the Anitra scenes take place, boats dominate the visual matrix of the film.

The only boat shown moving – and in keeping with the roundabout theme, it turns in a circle at least once before disappearing, - is the motorboat upon which Peer absconds with Ingrid. The next boat with which Peer is associated, is the rusting fishing trawler aboard which he is hauled by the Green Clad Woman after he has been pushed into the water by three sexually aggressive women in an abandoned dock-yard. After a short scene on deck with the Green Clad Woman, Peer is dropped with her into the keel of the vessel where he encounters a motley crew of sailors who taunt him both verbally and physically as they encourage him to join them and renounce his former existence.

Peer's escape from these maritime trolls only forces him further into the vessel and he finds himself knee-deep in water in some kind of sluice room as he encounters the Boyg, here represented as a menacing voice-off. As it is below the deck of an old, rusted fishing boat that seems to have partly sunk into a grassy plain that Peer meets the Green Clad woman for the second time, and below decks of a huge wooden vessel that Peer has his sexual encounters with Anitra, this space becomes associated with desire, fear and the most extreme disintegration of the self.

The largest vessel and the one upon which Peer is most in danger of losing himself is Anitra's boat. Initial low-angle shots and the relative diminutive size of Peer and Anitra enhance the enormity of this wooden vessel. As the camera switches to a long shot the boat is seen first from the side then from the front and it fills the entire visual frame. To underscore the vessel as a place of utmost dislocation from the self, the soundtrack has lapping water and screeching seagulls as if the boat is floating in the ocean, although as the subsequent long-shot reveals, this vessel is not on water but is rather precariously balanced in a metal frame on dry land. The sound therefore acts as a reminder that this boat is out of its natural environment, rather like the central character. Furthermore, the profusion of ropes in the opening shot of the scene, Peer's changed attire (he is wearing a smart jacket and shirt rather than his usual loose-fitting clothing), Peer's golf-playing on deck, and his final suggestion to Anitra that they shoot themselves, underscores this as a place of entrapment in which Peer is most estranged from himself. The most intimate scenes with Anitra take place below decks and hence invite parallels between this huge vessel and the boat upon which Peer interacts with the Green Clad Woman and the troll-like sailors, which in turn associates both spaces with madness and lunacy in the vein of Ibsen's Cairo asylum. An extension of this space is total submersion into water which happens only twice in the film, and only one of those events is actually visualized. As already mentioned, after Peer is pushed into the water by three women we see his face in an eerie green watery world of floating seaweed and eels. The second submersion, which is not filmed, takes place as Peer leaps into the water with Åse's corpse after her death, a scene that happens very close to the ending of this piece.

The development of the boat motif in the film is used to show Peer's journey of self-discovery, which while frightening at times when he penetrates deepest into his self, can also bring with it the possibility of redemption. As boats also represent Peer's dreams, we can see in the image of them how those dreams are both conditioned by our environment (the boats can be worn away by the sea and dried up on land), and how they can change our interpretation of that environment. Afloat in a sea of waving grass, the boats redefine the landscape they are in, just as art and the imagination redefines our everyday reality and just as Janson's adaptation reworks our understanding of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.

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### Biographical Note

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### Summary

This article analyses Uwe Janson's 2006 TV-film adaptation of *Peer Gynt*. This 81-minute-long film was shot on the island of Usedom in the Baltic Sea and makes extensive use of the landscape in its investigation of identity. The article examines the effects of limiting the geographical space of Peer's journey of self-discovery and pays particular attention to the symbolic use of boats. It also explores how Janson mirrors the self-reflexivity of Ibsen's work and maintains the romantic/anti-romantic dichotomy evident in the poetic text.

### Keywords

Peer Gynt, film adaptation, self-reflexivity, identity, symbolism, landscape, boat motif, self-discovery, romantic/anti-romantic

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<sup>i</sup> Janson directed Brecht's *Baal* in 2003 and Wedekind's *Lulu* in 2005 for ZDF Theatre Channel. All three adaptations sought to appeal to younger audiences according to reviews.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, Rolf Fjelde understands the piece as a drama of identity crisis that is bracketed by the Troll Dream and Onion Scene but which is diffused throughout Act IV and climaxes with the asylum scene (Fjelde, 1968, 36), and Jules Zettner suggests that "the subject of Act IV is Peer's 'drift'" (Zettner, 1970, 119). More recently Elisabeth Oxfeldt has offered an alternative to the symbolic or allegorical readings of Act IV. In *Nordic Orientalism*, she uses a post-colonial analysis to show how an understanding of the setting of Act IV as a geographical space existing in opposition to Norway facilitates a reading of *Peer Gynt* that "radically questions Romanticist notions of nationalism's intersection with Orientalism" (Oxfeldt, 2005, 137).

<sup>iii</sup> I am indebted to the work of Linda Hutcheon for my understanding of adaptation here.

<sup>iv</sup> 1918 *Peer Gynt* directed by Victor Barnowsky and in two parts, 1920 *Das Blut der Ahnen* (The Blood of our Forefathers) directed by Karl Gerhardt, 1934 *Peer Gynt* directed by Fritz Wendhausen.

<sup>v</sup> Ingmar Bergman's 1957 production in Malmö was perhaps the precursor to this tradition according to Marker & Marker (Marker & Marker, 1989, 26-30).

<sup>vi</sup> For details on the practices of Epic Theatre refer to Brecht's essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (Brecht, 1964, 33-42). "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces Alienation Effect," (Brecht, 1964, 136-147) and "Alienation effects in Chinese Acting" (Brecht, 1964, 91-99) have particular references to acting techniques.

<sup>vii</sup> For further information on the Stein production see Marker & Marker, 1989, 34-41.

<sup>viii</sup> In a letter to Edvard Grieg dated January 23 1874, Ibsen outlined his plans for adapting *Peer Gynt* for the stage stating among other things that, "More or less the whole of Act Four is to be omitted in performance" (qtd. in McFarlane, 1970, 84).