

# Alf Sjöberg's Film Fröken Julie : too much Cinema, too much Theater?

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie**

Band (Jahr): **11 (1981)**

PDF erstellt am: **05.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858393>

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BIRGITTA STEENE

## Alf Sjöberg's Film *Fröken Julie*: Too much Cinema, too much Theater?

Alf Sjöberg's screen version of Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* is a landmark in the post-war Swedish cinema and practically the only Swedish feature length film from that time to reach a wide international audience. In 1951 it shared the award at Cannes as best film of the year with Vittorio de Sica's *Miracle at Milan*. The high artistic quality of Sjöberg's *Fröken Julie* and its far-ranging public exposure have resulted in a large body of critical reviews by non-Swedish critics as well as several substantial articles written by Swedish film scholars. Thus Rune Waldecranz has discussed the juxtaposition of naturalistic elements and montage technique in the film in a 1964 issue of *Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet*,<sup>1</sup> and the *Fröken Julie* casebook – *Perspektiv på Fröken Julie* – includes two articles comparing Sjöberg's version to the original play: Lars Brusling and Henric Holmberg discuss the media technical aspects of the film and show how these affect the setting, the characters, the dialog and time span in Strindberg's work. Peter Ortman focusses his analysis on Sjöberg's use of multiple time levels and is somewhat critical of the director's departure from Strindberg's naturalistic conception of the classical dramatic unities.<sup>2</sup> I have found all these studies useful in preparing this paper, which will attempt to analyze the adaptation methods at work in Alf Sjöberg's screen version of Strindberg's drama.

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<sup>1</sup> RUNE WALDECRAZ, *Alf Sjöbergs film Fröken Julie*. Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet, Stockholm 1964, pp.7–9. Waldecranz has also published articles on the subject in the critical anthology *Essays on Strindberg*, ed. by R. Smedmark, Stockholm 1966, and in *Perspektiv på Fröken Julie*, ed. by Ulla-Britta Lagerroth and Göran Lindström, Stockholm 1972.

<sup>2</sup> *Perspektiv på Fröken Julie*, ed. by Ulla-Britta Lagerroth and Göran Lindström, Stockholm 1972, pp.153–165.

The relationship between theater and film operates on many levels and is as old as the cinema itself. Méliès, the early French filmmaker, though performing tricks with the camera like a popular magician, nevertheless photographed his films as if the action took place on a proscenium stage in a theater. The camera was static and assumed the point of view of a single spectator in an orchestra seat. It took filmmakers like Eisenstein and Griffith to release the film from its stage format and develop the spatial and temporal freedom of the cinematic medium. This development in turn suffered a set-back with the arrival of the sound film, which led producers all over the world to turn to successful theater plays as source material for films. So-called “canned theater,” i.e. plays lifted more or less verbatim from the stage to the screen began to inundate the film market, and for a while it seemed as if the theater had come back into the movies with a vengeance.

But no more than a decade after the introduction of the sound film, screen adaptors of theater plays began to reassert such particular features of the film medium as the all-seeing eye and the physical mobility of the camera. The concept of the “cinematic theater” began to emerge, i.e. film adaptations were made of stage dramas which utilized to the fullest the camera’s ability to transcend the physical boundaries of the theater stage.

“Canned theater” and “cinematic theater” represent two extreme approaches to film adaptations of stage dramas. A more differentiated view of the process might be desirable. Few films based on stage plays are completely bound by *either* theatrical *or* cinematic conventions; most adaptations rely rather on features derived from both art forms, and most successful screen renderings of theater works present a thoughtful balance between the two.

I would like to suggest that in the encounter between a drama designed for the stage and its transposition to the screen, one might differentiate between the following four variables, all of which can exist within one and the same film:

- I The film version may fail as cinema by adhering too closely to the theater framework of the play.
- II The film version may defy the limited physical scope of the play by utilizing the technical nature of the cinematic medium.

- III As a consequence the film version may revitalize the play and bring forth latent qualities in it that are not as easily expressed on the stage.
- IV The film version may destroy the concentrated power of the play by introducing too many cinematic elements.

I shall now discuss these four variables with specific reference to Sjöberg's filming of Strindberg's play *Fröken Julie*.

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I. *Not too long before the filming of Fröken Julie*, Alf Sjöberg had directed Strindberg's drama at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, with Ulf Palme and Inga Tidblad in the roles of Jean and Julie. It was in fact the success of this production that partly led producer Rune Waldecraz at Sandrews to modify an earlier ambition to make a film about August Strindberg and instead focus on one of his dramatic works. Under the circumstances it would hardly be surprising to find influences from the stage on the film version of *Fröken Julie*. It is indeed remarkable that Sjöberg succeeded to such a large degree in turning the play into a screen product that gives the impression of being cinematically conceived, even though, as we shall see later, Sjöberg himself maintained that he was merely translating theatrical innovations to the screen. Most critics who reviewed the film at its opening in 1951 experienced it as a *film* adaptation rather than a *filmed* play. Thus the signature Lill in *Svenska Dagbladet* wrote:

Filmen "Fröken Julie" är mötet mellan två starka och särpräglade konstnärstemperament, diktaren Strindberg och iscensättaren Sjöberg – ett möte som det slår gnistor ur och som utlöser något av en elektrisk chock på åskådaren. Ty först i en fri filmbearbetning får Sjöberg verklig tummelplats för den visionära fantasi som han i sin scenregi likväl alltid måste underordna den fastställda dramatiska originalformen, endast i en oberoende bildanalys får han tolka dramat så som honom lyster.

[The film "Fröken Julie" is the encounter between two strong and unique artistic temperaments, that of Strindberg the poet and Sjöberg the scenographer – an encounter that produces sparks and somewhat of an electric shock in the spectator. For it is only in a free filmatization that Sjöberg finds a real playground for his visionary imagination

which, in his directing for the stage, he must always subordinate the fixed dramatic form of the original. It is only in an independent visual analysis that he can interpret the drama as he pleases.]<sup>3</sup>

Jean Paul Sartre once stated that the major difference between theater and cinema lies in the fact that in the former the dramatic flow goes from the actor to the setting, in the latter it emanates from the setting to the actor.<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps only another way of saying that on the stage, it is above all the dialog and the presence of the actors that carry the action forward, while the cinema must tell its story in images that may or may not include human beings. In the theater the non-verbal resources of the stage are usually adjusted to the dramatic text. On film, on the other hand, the text must often be broken up into fragments, all the more so, the more montage-oriented the filmmaker is. In a Bergman film we can find long acting scenes in which the camera allows the actor to dominate the screen, but in the Russian and German expressionistic cinema with which Sjöberg identifies himself, the emphasis is on cutting and juxtaposition of images; there the visual elements frequently dominate over the dramatic text; it is after all a technique with origin in the *silent* cinema.

Nevertheless, later viewers of Sjöberg's *Fröken Julie* have often voiced reservations about it on the ground that it is too theatrical a film. Especially cinéma vérité-oriented critics from the sixties, for whom the cinema is a realistic medium, have objected to it being too artificial and choreographed a film, so that the reality it wants to convey appears "staged." What is at issue is not Sjöberg's fidelity (or lack thereof) to the dramatic text, but his stylization method, which has been called anti-cinematic, i.e. anti-realistic or "theatrical." Behind the discussion of Sjöberg's theatricality lies a certain amount of semantic confusion. "Theatrical" can refer to: 1) reliance upon the dramatic text where the image should be sufficient; 2) adherence to the conventions that govern the stage rather than the screen; and 3) the use of a visually stylized and artificial-looking reality. In my view it is only in the third and last instance that Sjöberg's filmatization of *Fröken Julie* can be called

<sup>3</sup> LILL (ELLEN LILLIEHÖÖK), *Fröken Julie – en film i högsta potens*, Svenska Dagbladet, July 31, 1951, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in ANDRÉ BAZIN, *What is Cinema?* Tr. by Hugh Gray, Berkeley 1971, p.102.

“theatrical” and it is questionable whether this formalist quality produces an inherent weakness in the film. Judging from the varied critical response to this stylistic aspect of the film, a reviewer’s particular bias of preference regarding the function of the film medium seems to dictate his evaluation.

Alf Sjöberg is a filmmaker fully aware of the manipulative potential of the cinema. His films indicate that to him the real challenge of the medium lies in the opportunity it affords him to impose his vision or interpretation on a text, whether it be his own script or one derived from a Strindberg play. Sjöberg’s film production is not large but his screen works present a homogeneous style and approach that bespeak of a very subjective use of the medium. In his own limited way, Sjöberg is an *auteur du cinéma*, every bit as personal as Ingmar Bergman. It was this subjective view and creative vision that led “Lill” in Svenska Dagbladet to conclude her review: “I filmen är Sjöberg inte författarens ödmjuka tjänare men hans jämlike – han blir själv diktare, ... bryter stilen, bestämmer tempot, ger nya perspektiv. Han trollar, han skapar.” In the film, Sjöberg is not the author’s humble servant but his equal – he becomes himself a poet, ... he breaks the style, decides the tempo, gives new perspectives. He conjures, he creates.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Sjöberg also wanted to remain faithful to Strindberg’s dramatic text. This would indicate that he set himself up in an artistically rather schizophrenic situation where he would be oscillating between loyalty to his own filmic vision and loyalty to the originator of his dramatic subject. The risk would certainly seem to be there that he might neither please the cinema purists, who would want him to shun the theatricality of Strindberg’s drama, nor the Strindberg purists who might tend to view as anathema any consciously filmic tampering with the playwright’s text.

Sjöberg is not totally successful in avoiding to get caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. But he makes an interesting attempt to extricate himself from his vulnerable position by relating his inclination towards expressionistic filmmaking, not to the cinematic medium but to Strindberg’s own development as a playwright. His point of departure for filming *Fröken Julie* is Strindberg of the post-inferno years rather than Strindberg, the naturalistic author of the 1880’s. I shall return to

<sup>5</sup> LILL, Svenska Dagbladet, July 31, 1951, p. 14.

this point later, in the larger context of my discussion of the relationship of Sjöberg's adaptation of *Fröken Julie* to variables II–IV.

## II. *Sjöberg's Fröken Julie defies the dramatic and theatrical scope of Strindberg's play.*

The French film critic André Bazin, who has discussed at length the relationship between film and theater,<sup>6</sup> has suggested that the film adaptor's first duty is to define "the dramatic circumference of his adaptation," i.e. the spatial and temporal borders within which the dramatic conflict of the playfilm will be acted out. Bazin has often been singled out as the special prophet of the documentary-oriented filmmakers because of his abhorrence of montage technique – the juxtaposition of images to form a symbolic pattern – and his critique of screen directors "who do not believe in reality." But in his essays on film and theater, Bazin argues against "cinematic theater," more precisely against film adaptations that attempt at all cost to transcend the scope of the stage play because it seems more "realistic" to do so. Instead the filmmaker should accept the theatrical *raison d'être* of a given play, yet not be awestruck by the dramatic conventions that dictate the physical lay-out or the technical solutions used to create it. The filmmaker should not remain so faithful to the original text that the camera might just as well have been brought into the theater to photograph an actual performance. Nor however must a film director ignore the psychological function of the original setting; the mood and the social atmosphere are all-important, but also the spatial relationship between setting and actor. Here according to Bazin, it is the filmmaker's task to find cinematic equivalencies, not resort to theatrical imitations. It is in this process of finding equivalencies that the film director must assure the viewers of the physical scope of his adaptation. A film audience will not object to an expansion of a well known play setting provided that the expansion be defined to them early in the film and remains consistent throughout the film.

Bazin's argument seems to have a certain bearing on Sjöberg's filmatization of *Fröken Julie*. From the very beginning, Sjöberg evokes the original Strindbergian mood of entrapment and eroticism, but through other means than those suggested in Strindberg's text. We

<sup>6</sup> BAZIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–124.

notice for instance that the establishing shot – the who, when and where shot – defines the drama for us mostly symbolically. The total dramatic circumference is still to be created and involves the entire first sequence of the film, which comprises the time from the initial credit shots to Jean's first entry into the kitchen, in other words a long prelude to the actual starting-point of Strindberg's drama.

As the credits move across the screen, we see a picture of a woman (Julie) standing next to a bird cage. Her eyes throw nervous, flittering glances, which seem to repeat the restless movement of the caged canary. The shot conveys a mood of apprehension and frustration but it does not single out for us the kitchen setting as described in Strindberg's opening stage directions. Sjöberg's Julie could just as well be peering out her bedroom window or any other room of the estate.

In the next shot Sjöberg begins to introduce us to the dramatic circumference of his film version. The camera changes from an objective observer watching Julie and the cage through the window frame to a subjective viewer (Julie) looking out the window at the midsummer celebration – the hoisting of the maypole. In the shots relating to this new, expanded part of the setting, Julie's (and the play's) world becomes defined in terms of 1) the dancing farmhands; 2) the festive occasion from which the aristocratic woman is excluded; 3) the pastoral grounds of the estate.

Once again the camera view shifts and assumes the position of an invisible spectator on the grounds, who observes a man (Jean) in the role of coachman driving a horse carriage through the park. Almost immediately the camera incorporates Jean as an observer, so that the shots of trees and statues can be assumed to present his perspective as he drives by. In fact, the main function of these double-perspective shots is not to expand the physical milieu but rather to introduce us to a new central character (Jean).

All the characters who have appeared so far, both those singled out and those presented in group, now converge on the dancing round in the hayloft. Sjöberg's camera focuses not only on Jean and Julie as they dance with each other but introduces yet another character, the servant girl Viola, who will become a plebeian foil for Julie throughout the film, chasing men with the fervor of a midsummer nymphomaniac.

This cinematic prelude defines then the locus dramaticus for us as that of the entire estate rather than the kitchen and servant quarters of



the original play. Unless one insists on a literal rendering of Strindberg's drama, a viewer has no difficulty accepting this enlargement of the milieu, for in spite of the expanded scope, Sjöberg creates a circumscribed world on the screen where the viewer becomes aware of the same social barriers as in the stage drama. Contributing to the creation of a sense of entrapment is the filmmaker's careful design of each frame and sequence. For instance, the farmhands that appear in the initial sequence move in stylized choreographed movements as though they were pawns or puppets and not people. Likewise, the grounds on the estate are photographed as though they were geometric designs, sharply defining the world in which the characters can move. In addition, Sjöberg succeeds in capturing some of the features mentioned specifically by Strindberg in the preface to his play, but features that may be more difficult to convey on the stage: the ritualistic and aphrodisiac mood of the midsummer night.

Sjöberg also defies the temporal stringency of Strindberg's play. The famous flashback sequences in which he visualizes Jean's account of his childhood and Julie's reminiscences of her past add another tangible time level to the original play. In these visualized narratives we move some fifteen to twenty years back in time and watch, for instance, how Jean goes to church as a young boy in order to catch a glimpse of Julie who is prettily asleep on a special chair that is set aside from the common people in the congregation. We also participate in Jean's first visit inside the palace-like estate and in his ouster and subsequent punishment. The flashbacks involving Jean's youthful escapades function reasonably well within the film because they do not really move outside the orbit of the dramatic circumference that Sjöberg has defined earlier: their emphasis is strongly social rather than psychological and reinforces the image of a hierarchic class community that was transmitted by the opening sequences of the film. By contrast, Julie's story of her parents' marital difficulties and the fiery destruction of her home seems like a dramatic and psychological intrusion by the director; they do not fit into the social context and in their focus on the mother as a ubiquitous presence, they reduce the conflict within Julie to an analytical *où-est-la-femme* myth. They also display some of the least desirable commercial features of film plots, a point I shall return to later.

### III. *Sjöberg's film version of Fröken Julie revitalizes and completes the play for us.*

In his discussion of cinematic faithfulness to an original dramatic text, André Bazin points out that in terms of a classic play, well-known to the public, the filmmaker must be careful not to tamper with the dialog and thus destroy the viewer's anticipation of the drama. However it is also conceivable, according to Bazin, that a dramatic *form* may become obsolete with time or that it can be more fully utilized in the film medium. As an example he lists the genre of the slapstick stage comedy, which relies heavily on rambunctious action and situational humor. This genre was taken over by the cinema and perfected in the comedies of Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. On the basis of this and other examples, Bazin formulates the view that the cinema may exist to complete the stage play. We may refer to this view as his larval theory:

What makes it possible to believe that the cinema exists to discover or create a new set of dramatic facts is its capacity to transform theatrical situations that otherwise would never have reached their maturity. In Mexico there is a kind of salamander capable of reproduction at the larval stage and which develops no further. By injecting it with hormones, scientists have brought it to maturity. In like fashion we know that the continuity of animal evolution presented us with incomprehensible gaps until biologists discovered the laws of *paedomorphosis*, from which they learnt not only to place embryonic forms in line of evolution of the species but also to recognize that certain individuals, seemingly adult, have been halted in their evolutionary development. In this sense certain plays in the theater are founded on dramatic situations that were congenitally atrophied prior to the appearance of the cinema.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after writing *Fröken Julie*, Strindberg stated: "Zolaism in natural scenery and staging seems to have run its course." Although his ambition had been to become "the Zola of the North", Strindberg had begun to react against the literalness and photographic realism practised by Zola's followers on the continent and in Scandinavia. Even though he termed *Fröken Julie* a naturalistic tragedy and attempted to present a psychological case study in the spirit of Zola, his preface to the play indicates that he was already becoming impatient with the restricting format of naturalistic drama; he speaks about using impressionistic painting as a model for the decor and derides excessive efforts to create the illusion of reality in the scenery: "We might at least be spared the pain of painted pots and pans." Strindberg's later post-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

inferno production bears out his growing feeling that contemporary drama must develop towards a more fluid form, making the naturalistic theater rapidly obsolete.

This development coincided with the birth of the cinema. At the time, the film medium was still lacking narrative sophistication and probably did not catch Strindberg's serious fancy. But he was, as Rune Waldecraz and others have pointed out, interested enough to be kindly disposed towards any filmatization of his works. His oftquoted statement to Gustav Uddgren – “you may cinematograph as many of my dramatic works as you please” – may be no more than the reaction of an artist who saw the PR value of the screen for his own dramatic production. Nevertheless the film medium did confirm some of Strindberg's own ambitions towards a new type of associative drama. In its unique capacity to telescope time and move freely in space, and through its use of visual incentives to give structure to the story, the cinema could realize those ambitions set forth by Strindberg in his famous preface to *Ett drömspel*:

Författaren har i detta drömspel med anslutning till sitt förra drömspel “Till Damas-kus” sökt härma drömmens osammanhängande men skenbart logiska form. Allt kan ske, allt är möjligt och sannolikt. Tid och rum existera icke; på en obetydlig verklighetsgrund spinner inbillningen ut och väver nya mönster: en blandning av minnen, upplevelser, fria påhitt, orimligheter och improvisationer. [In this dreamplay, as in his former dream play *To Damascus*, the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations.]

The “single dreamer-consciousness” that controls the drama is, as described by Strindberg, not unlike the all-roving, invisible and neutral camera eye:

...ett medvetande står över alla, det är drömmarens; för det finns inga hemligheter, ingen inkonsekvens, inga skrupler, ingen lag. Han dömer icke, frisäger icke, endast relaterar. [...a single consciousness holds sway over them all – that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates.]

In an article published in 1949, shortly before he started to film *Fröken Julie*, Alf Sjöberg maintains that the expressionistic Strindberg had anticipated the development of the cinema.<sup>8</sup> Sjöberg does not

<sup>8</sup> ALF SJÖBERG, *Omskakning i bildsinnet*, Biografbladet 30/4 (winter) 1949–50, p. 258.

regard the filmmaker's use of simultaneous time and space levels as *uniquely filmic* elements. Rather he traces their origin to modernistic painting and theater, to artists like Picasso and playwrights like Strindberg. Sjöberg refers to the technique as "hallucinations-realism," a term he borrows via Bertil Malmberg from Baudelaire. According to Sjöberg, it was the use of "hallucinations-realism" that permitted Strindberg to create on the theater stage a plasticity of space and simultaneity of time long before it was fully developed in the cinema. Strindberg in *Ett drömspel* suggests a dreamlike or hallucinatory situation on the stage while maintaining a hold on a tangible physical reality, so that the leap between the two levels of consciousness was made possible within one and the same scene. By comparison, Sjöberg claims, the cinema has lagged behind:

Det är tydligt att filmen bara till en obetydlig del prövat sina möjligheter till spel i flera plan, till simultanitet och förskjutningar. ... För Hironimus Bosch, Bruegel, Dali och Picasso, för Strindberg, Eliot och Ekelöf är detta ingenting främmande. Hos dem associerar, dubbleras och förvandlas individen, öppnas och stänges portarna till det outtalade, det omedvetna i en aldrig sinande ström – endast filmen, den obegränsade expansivitetens eget instrument, har icke prövat dessa vägar, icke vågat infoga den som konventioner, som självklara sätt att *se*. [It is obvious that the cinema has only to a small degree tested its potential at performance on several levels, at simultaneous action and displacements. . . . For Hironimus Bosch, Bruegel, Dali and Picasso, for Strindberg, Eliot and Ekelöf this is nothing strange. In their works the individual free-associates, doubles and is transformed; the gates to the inexpressible and the unconscious are opened and closed in a never-ending cycle. It is only the cinema, the very instrument of limitless expansiveness which has not tested these roads, has not dared incorporate them as conventions, as natural ways of *seeing*.]

Sjöberg then challenges the modern filmmaker to catch up with the tenuous conception of reality as projected by modern painters and playwrights:

Men först genom den hänsynslösa genomfrätningen av verkligheten, genom det ambivalenta bildgestaltandet, genom en simultan bildteknik . . . kan vi tala om filmen som konst för moderna människor, motsvarande poesi, måleri och teater.

[But only through a ruthless penetration of reality, through a simultaneous visual technique can we talk about the cinema as art for modern people, corresponding to poetry, painting and theater.]

In discussing Sjöberg's *Fröken Julie* Tryggve Emond has made the "Bazinian" statement that there is only one clearly valid, i.e. non-commercial and artistically justifiable reason for undertaking a filmati-

zation of a stage drama, namely that the film can extract values from the material, which lie outside the possibilities of the original dramatic form.<sup>9</sup> It might be expected that Sjöberg would question such a view. After all, does not his own opinion about the failure of the cinema to follow in the footsteps of modernistic art preclude the notion that a film can draw out latent qualities in a stage play?

But Sjöberg's approach to *Fröken Julie* must be seen as a two-step process: he is inspired by "the leap between two consciousness levels" that he has observed in modernistic painting and drama, but he also believes – as his program note to his film version of *Fröken Julie* indicates – that the camera's special forte is to perfect the technique of simultaneity in time and space and to give a play like *Fröken Julie* a particularly modern relevance:

I detta drama, så fullt av antiteser, i bristningen mellan det förgångna och det varande, mellan dag och natt, det stigande och det fallande vill kameran med sin rörelse och sin optik, sin lust efter nya verkligheter, nya förkortningar av rums- och tidsbegreppen bidra till genomlysandet av den moderna europeiska människans sammansatthet och kluvenhet.

[In this drama, so full of antitheses, in the break between the past and the present, between day and night, the ascending and the falling, the camera wishes – through its movement and optics, its desire for new realities, new foreshortenings of time and space – to contribute to the illumination of the complexity and ambivalence of modern European man.]<sup>10</sup>

Thus Sjöberg is able, through his filmatization of Strindberg's naturalistic drama, to meet his own challenge that the cinema follow up and develop the temporal and spatial innovations suggested by other modern art forms. His film version of *Fröken Julie* contains many elements of what he called "hallucinationsrealism." Briefly one might single out the following examples:

1. The use of the split screen to suggest two time levels, one referring to Julie's childhood past, the other to her present mood. That is to say, while Julie is drinking and talking about her past to Jean, one half of the screen shows us Julie as a child being carried into the same room by her mother. [This is incidentally a variation of the split stage used by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* where the upstairs and downstairs part of the structure on the stage represents two different time periods

<sup>9</sup> TRYGGVE EMOND, *Varför Fröken Julie?* Lundagård, Nr. 1 (January), 1951, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> ALF SJÖBERG, *Några ord av regissören*, Programblad, issued by SF.n.d.

in Willy Loman's confused mind. Sjöberg directed Miller's play at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in 1948.]

2. The projection of Julie's dream on the screen or of Jean's account to Kristin of Julie's confrontation with her fiancé. On both occasions the camera uses skillful dissolves or movements from an object within the flashback to an object in the present. Thus the veil that suggests the falling Julie in the dream flashback is transformed into a swan on the river where Julie is telling Jean of her fantasy. In such instances, Sjöberg's flashbacks do not serve the visually didactic purpose of spelling out an imaginary world to us; rather they create, through their smooth, transitional devices, a tenuous world between reality and sur-reality. Jean's narrative flashback (of Julie's confrontation with her former fiancé) is less hallucinatory in quality and rightly so, for Jean is after all telling of a real incident in the immediate past; nevertheless, here too Sjöberg succeeds in making us accept the flashback as a natural component in the film by leading us into the confrontation scene via the hectic shots of galloping riders and by using the simple "pan" shot as a transition between past and present events, so that Jean's account becomes not merely a piece of gossip but a moment of relived tension.

I would argue that it is in such uses of "hallucinationsrealism," cinematically conceived though perhaps, as Sjöberg has suggested, derived from the expressionistic theater, that the filmatization of *Fröken Julie* transcends and completes the original naturalistic drama. It is also this very feature that makes Parker Tyler include Sjöberg's *Fröken Julie* in his volume of *Classics of the Foreign Film*:

What is so remarkable about the filming of *Miss Julie* is the sheer aptness with which a first-rate, difficult dramatic text has been freed into real planetary space, into the open air. . . . Where the dramatist revealed the past lives of Miss Julie and Jean through their monologues, the film-maker has taken up the play as a rich programme for bringing the past before us as literal hallucination.<sup>11</sup>

IV. *In paying lip service to filmic conventions, Sjöberg commercializes Strindberg's drama and makes it lose its concentrated psychological power.*

A key word in describing Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* might be *restraint*. The key word in describing Sjöberg's film could be *abund-*

<sup>11</sup> PARKER TYLER, *Classics of the Foreign Film*, New York 1962, p. 166.

*ance*. Strindberg sets the entire action in one locale, the kitchen on the estate of Julie's father. In Sjöberg's film only one third of the action is set in the kitchen. Strindberg restricts his story to three characters: Julie, Jean and Kristin. Sjöberg presents a whole gallery of people, including Julie's parents, her governess, her fiancé, and dozens of farmhands. As I have tried to suggest however, Sjöberg's spatial and temporal expansion is not necessarily detrimental to the play. Where his artistic judgment seems to go awry is on the psychological and plot level. Seizing upon some of the earliest components of the feature film, Sjöberg adds intrigue, melodramatic action and stock characters to Strindberg's play. When such additions are coupled with the often overt symbolism of individual shots, the result is overexplicitness. Ironically enough Sjöberg has stated that his ambition as a filmmaker is to *suggest* a dramatic pattern that can be completed in the viewer's imagination rather than spelled out on the screen:

Liksom vetenskapsmannen, ledd av sin erfarnhet, gissar sig till den kruka vari skärorna han hittar en gång ingått, så skall åskådaren med sin av livet fördjupade insikt och erfarenhet själv bygga och avslöja händelsefragmentets sammanhang och finna sin lust och befrielse i anandet av en helhet, en hel form.

[Just as the scientist, guided by his experience, can surmise the urn in which the shards he has found have once been a part, so the viewer – with his insight and experience deepened by life – will himself build and unravel the connections in the fragmented action and will find pleasure and a sense of liberation in his surmising of a totality, of a whole form.]<sup>12</sup>

Sjöberg's statement is almost an echo of Strindberg's own words on his preface to *Fröken Julie*: “. . . ty därigenom att man icke ser hela rummet och hela möblemanget, lämnas tillfälle att ana, dvs att fantasin sättes i rörelse och kompletterar.” [... because one does not see the entire room and all the furniture one is given a chance to surmise, i.e. to set the imagination in motion and to complete the play.]

There are some additions or changes in Sjöberg's film that support the above statements. For instance, the projection of Julie in the opening moments of the film is sustained for such a long time that it becomes embedded in our minds for the rest of the film. Towards the end when Jean kills the canary, we can conjure forth the opening shots and realize without being directly told so, that it is in effect Julie that Jean is killing.

<sup>12</sup> ALF SJÖBERG, *Bara en mor. Reflexioner kring en icke-dokumentarisk film*, Biografbladet 30/3 (Fall) pp. 158–166.

Often however Sjöberg's visual self-indulgence or his concession to filmic clichés destroys the suggestiveness and concentration of Strindberg's play. His handling of the seduction scene may serve as an illustration. In Strindberg's drama Jean and Julie withdraw into the servant quarters behind the kitchen while a group of dancing farmhands enter the room. Their dance replaces what Bazin has called "the miracle of the curtain," i.e. the theater convention that permits the playwright to shift time and place without losing his credibility with the audience. Had Strindberg chosen to use a curtain fall instead of the dance, the viewer would have accepted the idea that the seduction took place while the curtain was down and that we enter a new phase in the relationship between Jean and Julie in the next scene or act.

In the cinema, the miracle of the curtain is usually replaced by the cut to a new locale or, in earlier films, by a dissolve indicating a change of place or the passage of time. But Sjöberg follows Strindberg's format and retains the action in the kitchen. At first the appearance of a rowdy group of midsummer dancers does not seem to break the narrative logic of the scene. We have watched the same people dancing earlier in the hayloft and on the parklike grounds; why should they not enter the kitchen, which surely is part of their territory? Besides, Sjöberg has added another motivation for their presence: they have actually discovered Jean and Julie in the park earlier and are now chasing them. Once in the kitchen they notice the locked door and proceed to indulge in a revelry of bachanalean proportions.

The problem facing Sjöberg at this point is however that because of the chase – one of the earliest cinematic plot devices – the erotic sensuality between Jean and Julie, which culminates in the seduction, is lost. Sjöberg must find some means therefore of telling us that the couple has not simply gone into hiding but are actually making love. He opts for telling of the seduction indirectly, using the group of dancers and revelers in the kitchen as a symbolic foil. In a rhythmically wild series of shots, Sjöberg photographs the dancers with their arms raised to form a tunnel which one couple after another passes through. Beer pours from a barrel and a hand grabs an overflowing glass. The dancers move in an undulating rhythm across the floor. Two men caress a girl while a couple performs a wild polka. Suddenly there is a cut to three soldiers outside, shooting with their rifles which point phallic-like straight into the sky. As the rifles produce smoke and chaos the dancers



rush out, overturning the barrel of beer as they leave. An image of beer flowing in streams on the floor is superimposed upon the departing farmhands, then dissolves, at which point Jean and Julie exit from their hiding place.

This may be an indirect way of telling about the couple's erotic encounter but it is hardly subtle. The symbolism of the sequence is blatant. While the quick cutting seems appropriate for the bachanalean mood of the dancers, the sequence as a whole suffers from two basic flaws: 1) Sjöberg permits an age-old cinematic convention – the chase – to interfere with the build-up of erotic tension between Jean and Julie, and 2) the director piles so many symbolic details on top of each other that we lose the sense of a natural happening. His worst error is bringing the three soldiers into the frame. They have no earlier narrative function in the film and are nothing but a willful addition by the filmmaker, introduced in order for him to make a symbolic point.

Strindberg's overriding focus in his drama is Jean's seduction of Julie. To this Sjöberg adds a plethora of minor motifs and scenes full of dramatic intrigue: the farmhands are not just a group of midsummer eve revellers who dance into the kitchen and surprise Jean and Julie; they become spies and threatening peeping toms who seem to follow the couple everywhere. Sjöberg elaborates on Strindberg's plot by introducing action-oriented elements: Julie's account of her past becomes, in Sjöberg's hands, both an unconventional wedding feast for her parents and a spectacular fire, with a last-minute rescue of the young child, Julie, from the burning inferno. The concrete events that make up this extended flashback and its sheer *length* give it a *factual* definitiveness that usurps its quality of reminiscence. In Strindberg's play we never know for sure how much of Julie's personal accounts is make-believe, how much is recollection colored by the present and how much is a reasonably accurate retelling of childhood happenings. But Sjöberg's narrative and psychological elaborations, ranging from the spectacular fire to the use of Julie's mother as a threatening specter throughout the film, create a drama within the drama and shift our attention too much from the present to the past. The immediacy of Jean's and Julie's *almost* accidental love affair is lost in the film's attempt to analyse Julie's background. In his review of the film, Harry Schein put his finger on precisely this problem:

I pjäsen är Jean och Julie självklara. Filmen. ... tvingas förklara dem som människor och ju mera den förklarar, socialt, psykologiskt och estetiskt, desto mindre sannolika blir de. När filmen fixerar det outtalade och antydda i bild kväver den publikens fantasi och provocerar dess förnuft. I stället för att uppleva den rena känslorörelsen mellan Jean och Julie tvingas man förstå den. Men det kan man inte alltid och då blir man även känslomässigt oberörd.

[In the play Jean and Julie are self-evident. The film. ... is forced to explain them as human beings and the more it explains, socially, psychologically and esthetically, the less probable they become. When the film fixates visually that which is unspoken and suggestive, it suffocates the public's imagination and provokes their reason. Instead of experiencing the purely emotional hurricane between Jean and Julie, one is forced to understand it. But that is not always possible and then one becomes emotionally untouched.]<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

To insist on the use of cinematic versus theatrical conventions as absolute guidelines in adapting a play to the screen reduces the adaptation process to a mechanical undertaking. A film director's faithfulness to his own vision on the play, his sense of artistic integrity and his trust in his audience seem to me more important criteria than his abidance by a fundamentally "cinematic" or "theatrical" method. The physical and temporal liberties that Sjöberg takes with Strindberg's play are not detrimental per se, as the first half of his film demonstrates. But it is my belief that Sjöberg allowed himself to become side-tracked by certain commercial interests that may have operated as nothing more than cinematic habits at the time rather than as actual pressure from his producers. Ironically enough, and in spite of all its cinematic sophistication, Sjöberg's *Fröken Julie* develops more and more in the direction of the boulevard melodrama, i.e. the very genre which Strindberg was trying consciously to depart from but also the genre from which the early cinema borrowed heavily. The end result is that Sjöberg's adaptation of Strindberg's drama is an artistically creative production saddled with a blatantly hackneyed film plot. It was this impossible juxtaposition of artistic and commercial elements that led one Swedish critic to exclaim after the premiere of the film: "Aldrig har en så utomordentlig film varit så dålig!" (Never has such an excellent film been so bad!)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> HARRY SCHEIN, *Sjöbergs Julie*, BLM 20/7, pp. 558.

<sup>14</sup> STIG ALMQVIST, *Fröken Julies storhet och fall*, Film-Journalen, No. 59, 1951, p. 5.

