

Morten Egholm

## The innovative and wilful adaptor – What Carl Th. Dreyer did to Hjalmar Söderberg's *Gertrud*

If a film director wanted to be considered a real artist by his fellow directors writing for the famous French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was absolutely necessary that his film be the product of his own, personal vision. Adaptations were out of the question, because as a real artist you were supposed to use “the camera as a pen”,<sup>1</sup> not just be an interpreter of another artist's aesthetic visions. If one based one's film on one's own story, one was an *auteur*; if one made an adaptation one was merely a simple *metteur en scène*. The famous Danish film director Carl Th. Dreyer (1889-1967) made fourteen feature films in his career, of which thirteen were adaptations. The last four of his five sound films (made in the period 1931-1964) were adaptations of plays.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, all the famous film directors and

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<sup>1</sup> The expression is taken from Alexandre Astruc's ground-breaking article from 1948 (Astruc, 1970 (1948), p. 150).

<sup>2</sup> The four last films are *Day of Wrath* (1943, based on a play by the Norwegian playwright Hans Wiers-Jenssen), *TVå Människor* (1945, based on a play by the German playwright W.O. Somin), *Ordet* (1955, based on a play by the Danish playwright Kaj Munk) and *Gertrud* (1964).

film critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma* – Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol – regarded him as one of the greatest *auteurs* in film history.

When Dreyer's last film, an adaptation of the play *Gertrud* (1906) by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg, had its debut in Paris in December 1964 it caused a big scandal. The public booed and walked out of the film and all the critics found it extremely slow, lifeless and old fashioned; according to them it looked more like an outmoded filmed theatre performance than the cinematic vision of an *auteur*. Even the Danish ambassador in Paris forgot all his diplomacy and told the press openly how much Dreyer's film had disappointed him.<sup>3</sup> The only people who defended the film, and secured it a sort of renaissance, were surprisingly enough the directors writing for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Even though the film was an adaptation of a play, they did not see it as a film without an artistic vision. On the contrary, the film had almost nothing to do with Söderberg's original play, they said, and Dreyer had merely used it as an excuse for promoting his own cinematic style and his own ideas about what love is. He was still a true *auteur*. In the February 1965 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Gertrud* topped Claude Chabrol's top ten list of the best films of 1964, and in the issue of October 1965 Jean-Luc Godard compared it to "the last string quartets of Beethoven".<sup>4</sup>

Was it really necessary for the directors at *Cahiers du Cinéma* to champion Dreyer in this way? Perhaps Dreyer did not see such a big contradiction between being an *auteur* and a *metteur en scène*. Actually, in an interview for French television in the early 1960s he called his work as a film director "my *métier*".<sup>5</sup> And perhaps he did

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<sup>3</sup> All references to the film *Gertrud* are taken from Drouzy, 1982, vol. II, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> The details about Chabrol and Godard's high ranking of the film are taken from Morten Piil, 2000, p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Taken from Torben Skjødt Jensen's film on Dreyer, which is actually called

not see it as a problem that almost all of his films were based on a literary source. After all, he was in many ways a child of the silent cinema, and in that period an adaptation of a famous literary work was considered the highest degree of quality in film production.

Film style is invisible – yet it exists!

As early as 1920, Dreyer was discussing film aesthetics with his famous Danish colleague Benjamin Christensen. He did that in an article called 'Nye Ideer om Filmen'.<sup>6</sup> Christensen was in many ways an early spokesman for the *auteur* theory, as he said that the film director's most important task is to make poems out of pictures.<sup>7</sup> Dreyer replied to and contradicted this in his article: "the task of the cinema is and will be the same as the theatre's: to interpret the thoughts of others" (filmens opgave er og bliver den samme som teatrets: at tolke andres tanker).<sup>8</sup> Most film critics agree that this anonymous interpretation of the ideas of others (the writers) is a totally dominant idea in Dreyer's early films. According to Ebbe Neergaard (the first film critic to write a whole book on Dreyer's films) the turning point for Dreyer is *Du skal ære din Hustru/Master of the House* (1926),<sup>9</sup> in which for the first time he fully allows a dis-

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"Carl Th. Dreyer: Min Metier" (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Translation: 'New Ideas on film', taken from a Danish collection of Dreyer's articles concerning film theory: *Carl Th. Dreyer: Om filmen* (1964).

<sup>7</sup> Christensen had already proved his ability to be such a film poet in his two early pioneering films *Det hemmelighedsfulde X/ Sealed Orders* (1914) and *Havnens Nat/Blind Justice* (1916). But first and foremost he proved it in his third feature film *Häxan/ Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922). Logically enough, it is *Häxan* which receives the longest discussion in Dreyer's 1964 article, when it comes to giving examples.

<sup>8</sup> Dreyer, 1964 (1920), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> According to Neergaard, *Master of the House* (1926) is the first film where Dreyer "regarded and formed his material in a pure cinematic way" (Neergaard, 1963, p. 43).

tinctively personal style to shine through his adaptation of a literary source (it was an adaptation of a play by the Danish playwright Svend Rindom). Erik Ulrichsen, another early Danish Dreyer scholar, is of the opinion that Dreyer first emerges as a genuine film poet with *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928). Younger film critics, though, often choose to see his sixth feature, the German-produced *Mikaël* (1924), as the first purely Dreyerian masterpiece. Tom Milne says in his book on Dreyer: *Mikaël* is “the first of Dreyer’s films that one can watch today without having to make allowances for its age or status as an apprentice work” (Milne, 1971, p. 54).

The fact is that through the years Dreyer did not change his opinion about being an interpreter of others’ thoughts much. Even though he eventually succeeded in creating his own technical and visual style, the literary source was always important to him. In 1943, Dreyer wrote an important article for the Danish newspaper *Politiken* about film style. What he says about making an adaptation shows us that Dreyer thought it possible to be a visionary filmmaker and at the same time stay loyal to the literary source:

The soul emerges through the style, which is how the artist expresses his way of perceiving his material. Style is necessary to retain inspiration in an artistic form. But it’s invisible, it cannot be demonstrated [...] The first creative impulse for a film comes from the author, on whose work the film is based. But from the moment you have the poetic basis, it is the director’s task to create the style of the film. (Dreyer, 1964 (1943), p. 71)

This is typical of Dreyer: one has to respect the literary source, while yet at the same time showing one’s own personal style in a modest, quiet and not too conspicuous way. Eleven years later, he again chose this approach. In an interview given during the shooting of *Ordet* he says:

[...] if a work by Kaj Munk shall be made into a film, the aim must be to transform the work into a cinematic unified whole. The approach to the work with Kaj Munk's "The Word" has all along been and will still be: in the first instance to acquire Kaj Munk and then forget all about him (Dreyer, 1964 (1954), p. 92)

When it comes to the discussion between being a real film artist (later called *auteur*) and an interpreter of others' thoughts, Dreyer does not accept that the two categories are mutually exclusive. The style is something invisible, hidden behind the basic structure and idea of the literary source – but the style definitely has to be there and it has to be personal, otherwise there is no film! At the same time, however, the literary source also dictates the style that will be developed during the process of adapting.

#### *Gertrud* – an old dream

Both on a thematic and a stylistic level, Dreyer was very interested in, and inspired by, the works of Hjalmar Söderberg. Furthermore, the biography of the writer also interested him immensely, and the idea of making an adaptation of a work by Söderberg was an old dream. In an interview given to the Danish film magazine *Kosmorama* in 1965, Dreyer says:

[...] I think that already in the '20s I wanted to do something of Söderberg's, first and foremost *Dr. Glas*, but I couldn't get that one, so *Gertrud* came to mind. But that had to be given up as there was too much dialogue in it: that was when there were only silent movies. Söderberg has in fact interested me from my earliest youth.<sup>10</sup>

In almost all of his films Dreyer was occupied by the task of de-

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<sup>10</sup> Here taken from Drum & Drum, 2000, pp. 249-250.

scribing suffering women, who fight for their beliefs, rights and ideas about the liberation of women. It is therefore to be expected that he would also find the Gertrud character fascinating, even though she is a little different from the women in his other films. Gertrud is a strong and intellectual upper-class woman who believes in herself and chooses to be lonely instead of staying in loveless relationships and marriages. Accordingly, she leaves her first real love, the artist Gabriel Lidman (the alter ego of Söderberg) and at the end of the play she leaves her husband, the boring politician Gustav Kanning, who can only think about his political career. The third man in her life, her young lover Erland Jansson, lets *Gertrud* down during the play, which hurts her, though she stays calm and in control. Compared to some other Dreyer heroines, for example Ida Frandsen in *Master of the House* (1926), Jeanne D'Arc in *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928) and Anne in *Day of Wrath* (1943) – all three described by Dreyer as naïve and uneducated – Gertrud is an extremely self-assured and emancipated woman.

Another important reason why Dreyer wanted to make *Gertrud* was that he had just read a (then) recently published Swedish thesis about the play.<sup>11</sup> It was a thesis proving that *Gertrud* was based on a period in Söderberg's private life: a difficult love affair with a young intellectual woman called Maria von Platen.<sup>12</sup> He also describes a similar relationship in his novel *Den allvarsamma leken* (1912, The serious game), where this time the man is the main character in the liaison. Dreyer has obviously read this novel too, since he lets Gertrud in the film make the following remark, earlier passed by the newspaper deputy head Markel in *Den allvarsamma leken*:

You do not choose your own destiny. And you do not choose your wife, your mistress or your children. You get them, and you have them, and sometimes you lose them. But you do not

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<sup>11</sup> Sten Rein: *Hjalmar Söderbergs Gertrud*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1962.

<sup>12</sup> Details taken from Drouzy, 1982, vol. II, p. 222.

choose!” (Söderberg, 1974 (1912), p. 63)<sup>13</sup>

On a biographical level, Dreyer also showed a lot of interest in the real person behind the character of Gertrud, Maria von Platen. He actually went to the place in Sweden where Maria von Platen lived in her youth. He wanted to shoot most of the scenes here, so that he could stay as faithful as possible to the literary source. For practical reasons this was not possible, but during the process he was also in contact with the lady’s descendants. When he shot the epilogue describing Gertrud as an old woman (an epilogue added by Dreyer himself), he insisted that the decorations in the studio should resemble in every detail the daily surroundings of Maria von Platen,<sup>14</sup> and the dialogue in the epilogue was “directly taken from a correspondence in 1957 between the two real persons, on whom Söderberg had based his characters” (Tybjerg, 2006, p.37).<sup>15</sup> It was therefore not only the literary source that was very important to Dreyer, but also the real story behind the work. Actually, Dreyer did more than just adapt Söderberg, he mixed the author’s fiction and his life story. Certainly a very unique way to adapt a literary source! This may usefully be discussed in relation to the following aspects: the narrative level, the stylistic level, and the description of the main characters.

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<sup>13</sup> In Dreyer’s film this has been shortened to: “You do not choose your wife and your children, you *get* them, but you do not choose. Destiny determines it all”. In the film, Gertrud is quoting her father with this remark.

<sup>14</sup> These details are taken from Drouzy, 1982, p. 223. Drouzy’s conclusion is very different from my own. He sees Dreyer’s interest in the private life of Maria von Platen as an excuse to visit the area of Sweden where his late mother grew up. Drouzy’s book is an attempt to prove that Dreyer in all his films is seeking the mother whom he never knew, because she conceived him out of wedlock and therefore had to put him up for adoption shortly after he was born.

<sup>15</sup> Dreyer read the correspondence in Sten Rein’s biography.

### The narrative level

The language of film is of course fundamentally different from the language of the theatre on a narrative level. But the film *Gertrud* actually follows its literary source quite closely when it comes to how the story is told. Dreyer has of course curtailed the dialogue a great deal – only about half of Söderberg's remarks are to be found in the film. At the same time, Dreyer is more focused on driving the plot forward: the opening scene, for example, featuring Gertrud and her husband Kanning, runs for only one sixth of the film's total running time; in the Söderberg version it takes up around a quarter of the play's total length. However, Dreyer does not focus that much on the plot-driven film language, and one certainly does not find the traditional narrative structure of a mainstream Hollywood production in his adaptation: *Gertrud* is a film without “point of attack”, “point of no return”, “second turning point”, “climax”, and so on. At the same time it is very much structured as a theatre piece in three acts (just as its literary source): 1<sup>st</sup> act – ordinary world (Gertrud together with Kanning in their home), 2<sup>nd</sup> act – special world (Gertrud together with Erland Jansson and at the celebration party for Gabriel Lidmand), 3<sup>rd</sup> act – back in the ordinary world (Gertrud leaving her husband, and then the addition of the epilogue, see below).<sup>16</sup>

In many ways Dreyer follows the chronology of the play, and there are actually only four important exceptions. Twice he chooses a flashback to visualize what Gertrud is merely relating in the play: first, the first time she visits her lover, Erland (32 minutes into the film), and second, the day she discovers that her first real love, Gabriel Lidman, found his art more important than his love for her (91 minutes into the film). Third, he adds a dream-like erotic scene, where Gertrud and her lover, the pianist Erland, have a rendezvous in the latter's apartment. Fourth, he chooses to add an epilogue,

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<sup>16</sup> All the terms here are taken from Tine Breum, 2004, p. 83.



where we meet Gertrud as an old woman living in loneliness far away from the madding crowd. During this final scene her friend Axel (a character not found in the play) pays her a visit, and she recites a poem about love which she wrote as a young woman. In the play this poem is whispered by a grey female-like symbolic character (by Söderberg called *The Shape*) at the celebration party for Gabriel Lidman. The poem itself is exactly the same in both play and film: “Look at me/Am I beautiful?/No/But I have loved//Look at me/Am I young?/No/But I have loved//Look at me/Do I live?/No/But I have loved” (Söderberg, 1967(1906), p. 59 and 107 minutes into the film). Why Dreyer chose to add the epilogue has been the subject of much discussion. His own explanation shows us that he certainly had Söderberg in mind when he took the decision:

The “epilogue”, as you call it, is my own work. But it is built on something solid; precisely, Maria von Platen, who was Söderberg’s inspiration and model for Gertrud herself. I was afraid that audiences would not accept the abrupt ending that the play has: she runs away and her husband runs after her calling ‘Gertrud! Gertrud! Gertrud!’ and the curtain falls. I didn’t dare to do that in the film. I thought that during the course of the movie, people would grow to like her so much that they would want to know what happened to her later. Then we have the satisfaction of seeing how she grew through her sufferings, and in the closing scenes a certain dignity appears that becomes her. She doesn’t pity herself; she isn’t sorry for anything. She has sentenced herself to loneliness as a punishment. I never have antipathy for my characters, heroes or villains. And I never caricature them. For Gertrud my feelings are respect and compassion. That is why I wrote the epilogue for which I was so strongly criticized. I thought I should show that she understood the burden she had to bear, that she had to carry it on her own shoulders, the

burden of loneliness. We see that she bears it with honor. (Taken from Drum & Drum, 2000, p. 250, the interview was given 2 February 1965).

Again we see that it is very important for Dreyer to expand the story of the play with Söderberg's own life story. This is an interesting approach: by adding a scene based on biographical facts, Dreyer hopes that the audience will obtain a better understanding of the actions of the Gertrud character.

In general, it is quite interesting to see how few extra scenes in total Dreyer chose to add to his adaptation. Normally, when one adapts a play one tries through extra scenes to give visualization to many of the things that otherwise only exist as remarks made in the play. Such a procedure makes the story more dynamic and more cinematic. This is definitely not the case with the film version of *Gertrud*, and this is also one of the main reasons why so many contemporary critics found it slow, static and outdated.

The play consists of five scenes (two scenes in acts 1 and 3, arranged symmetrically around only one scene in act 2). For its part, the film consists of eleven scenes; Dreyer has added a mere six scenes, including the four already mentioned earlier (where both flashbacks should perhaps actually be seen as subsections of other scenes). The two additional scenes not yet mentioned are extremely short and with only minor significance: one scene where Kanning is driving in his coach to the theatre in Stockholm, while his thoughts are being told to us by a voice-over (only 2 minutes and 30 seconds in the film), and another scene where Gertrud is leaving the morning after her rendezvous with Erland in his apartment (only 2 minutes and 40 seconds).

On the narrative level, Dreyer chooses to stay very close to Söderberg's play, but never to such an extent that one feels that one is just watching a filmed theatre performance. On the contrary, through the use of light (the contrast between black and white is – as always in a Dreyer movie – absolutely gorgeous), body

movements, tempo and camera angles, one feels all the time that one is having a pure cinematic experience, created by a man who is extremely aware of his own visual style. By adding the epilogue based on biographical facts, Dreyer on a narrative level is also showing us that he is not only making an impersonal adaptation of a literary source, but also a film about Söderberg and Maria von Platen's private life story.

#### The description of the main characters

In its focus on female emancipation, Söderberg's play in many ways has its roots in *the modern breakthrough* and Scandinavian naturalism of the 1870s and 1880s. Gertrud is a woman who will not accept a male-dominated society, where love and tenderness only rank as second best. At the same time, there is also a great deal of pessimistic *fin-de-siècle* in Söderberg's play (even though it was written six years into the twentieth century): this especially applies to the description of people from the upper classes who feel alienated, decadent and out of touch with their own feelings and sexuality. In many ways, Dreyer's adaptation is an example of the modernism of European cinema in the 1960s: a highly stylized description of fundamental alienation in modern secularized society. Still, it is important to point out that Dreyer's adaptation is situated in the same historical period as the play. Furthermore, Dreyer, with his usual focus on women suppressed by society and church, is also in many ways a child of the modern Breakthrough (even though he was born as late as in 1889), and when it comes to literature he obviously finds it interesting to make films based on works from this period: he has made adaptations, besides Söderberg, of Herman Bang (*Mikaël*, 1924; *Michael*), Holger Drachmann (*Der var engang*, 1922; *Once Upon a Time*, 1922), Kristofer Jansson (*The Parson's*

*Widow*, 1920) and Jacob Bull (*The Bride of Glomdal*, 1927).<sup>17</sup>

However, the essential question remains: is it the same Gertrud, Gustav Kanning, Erland Jansson and Gabriel Lidman that we meet in Dreyer's film as well as in Söderberg's play?

With regard to Gertrud, the answer is both yes and no. In the film, just as in the play, Gertrud is described as a strong and independent woman, but in Söderberg's version she is definitely more fragile, naïve and unaware of what exactly she wants. In the play, Gertrud and Kanning have had a child who has died. To Erland Gertrud explains that this is an important reason why her marriage with Kanning has grown colder and colder (Söderberg, 1967 (1906), p. 43). Dreyer does not include this in his portrait of Gertrud, and thus he shows us a far less wounded and sensitive woman. Dreyer's Gertrud is much more dreamy and idealistic – one can hardly imagine her giving birth to a child.

Dreyer has added an extra character in the film, the platonic friend Axel, with whom Gertrud can have intellectual conversations. It is also Axel to whom she chooses to flee when she leaves Kanning at the end of the film. She wants to meet him in Paris, where she plans to study psychology. Her friendship with Axel gives an impression of Gertrud as an intellectual woman, who knows where to go after leaving her husband. Söderberg's Gertrud, however, is more a typical female character of the modern Break-through. In point of fact, she seems like an updated version of Ibsen's Nora. The important question here is where does Gertrud go when she leaves? For Söderberg's Gertrud it is a far more difficult decision to end her marriage than for Dreyer's Gertrud, and once again Söderberg's figure therefore seems even more vulnerable.

The added scene in the film, where Gertrud and Erland are having a rendezvous in his apartment, also shows us a Gertrud who is quite different from the Gertrud of the play. Here we see a Gertrud

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<sup>17</sup> The dates refer to the film versions.

as Dreyer most likes her: poetic, dreamy and erotic, dominating the conversation:

Erland: It sounds like a dream.

Gertrud: It is a dream. Life is a dream.

Erland: Life?

Gertrud: Yes, life is one long, long chain of dreams, drifting into one another.

Erland: And the mouth you spoke of?

Gertrud: A dream.

Erland: And the mouth you seek?

Gertrud: Also a dream.

(32 minutes into the film).

In many ways, Dreyer has chosen to show us the same Kanning that we meet in the play. But there are two important differences. First, Kanning's role is much bigger in the play. We hear a great deal about his political affairs and his attempts to become a minister. This part obviously does not interest Dreyer very much, which is understandable, as it is in the long political discussions that the play seems most dated. A much more important issue that Dreyer has chosen to play down is Kanning's relationship with his mother. In the final scene, after Gertrud has left her husband, Kanning's snobbish and almost indolent mother appears in the living room; in the opening scene of the film she has also appeared there to collect her monthly financial support from her son, but this final scene is exclusive to the play. She comforts her son, who starts to cry because his emancipated wife has left him. In the film no tears are shed, and it seems that Dreyer has a much less sentimental view of the Kanning character. In the play, the mother immediately takes her son's side, and she totally condemns Gertrud's actions. By placing the mother together with her son in the very last seconds of the play, Söderberg opens up the possibility of a psychological interpretation so typical for Scandinavian naturalism: Kanning's inability to

show and give love to another woman can be seen as the result of an Oedipal bond.

Like Kanning, Erland Jansson, too, is understood more psychologically and sociologically by Söderberg than by Dreyer. In the play he explains to Gertrud why he is on the booze every night: "I have it in my blood, my father was also a drunkard" (p. 41), and he goes on to tell her that he comes from a poor background: "My life has been work and want and sometimes – hunger" (*ibid.*). These remarks Dreyer has taken away, and in the film Erland merely says: "I live intensely, because I like it". Again we see that Dreyer is not very interested in psychology and sociology; rather he wants to show us Erland as an unscrupulous nihilist who is not able to show tenderness towards women.

The biggest discrepancy between Dreyer's and Söderberg's approaches lies in the characterization of Gabriel Lidman. In the scene where Gabriel Lidman is being celebrated for his return to Denmark on his fiftieth birthday, Dreyer has added a speech about the artist, given by a young admiring student. This speech is typical of Dreyer, and it reveals in many ways that Dreyer probably sees himself as Lidman's alter ego. In the speech, the student tells how Lidman has always fought against marriage as an institution (the very same thing that Dreyer has done in most of his films), and the student praises Lidman for being an artist who never compromises when it comes to seeking the truth through art. This reminds one of problems that Dreyer had all his life, always having difficulties getting financial support for his films because he would not make compromises. Dreyer has also made Lidman milder, lonelier and certainly less vulgar than Söderberg has. In the play Lidman takes up time telling Kanning how in Rome he lives with a courtesan who has captivated him but from whom he has become sexually independent (p. 57). Dreyer's Lidman mentions nothing about this Roman courtesan, and in view of the way Ebbe Rode interprets the role of Gabriel Lidman it is difficult to imagine him having such a

relationship. In his desperate search for true love Söderberg's Lidman has become a slave of his sexual instinct, while Dreyer's Lidman has chosen to live a life of self-pity and loneliness. If we use the motto of the book, formulated by Lidman (and also used in the film) – "I believe in the pleasure of the flesh and the irreparable loneliness of the soul" (pp. 5 and 84) – one could say that Söderberg's Lidman has chosen "pleasure of the flesh", while Dreyer's Lidman has chosen "the irreparable loneliness of the soul". Both of them appear to be tragic characters.



Gertrud (Nina Pens) and Gabriel Lidman (Ebbe Rode).

Dreyer is first and foremost interested in the characters' view on love, the pure and idealistic sort. How the characters have possibly been traumatized in their childhood, what problems they have with their sexuality and what their political interests are does not interest him as much. His portraits therefore become more idealised than those of Söderberg. By toning down the psychological and the political parts, Dreyer creates a dreamlike atmosphere in his film, where all the characters seem to be in a state somewhere between

hypnosis and total alienation. What Söderberg gives us in the play is rather more classical-psychological rounded portraits of typical characters of upper-class, intellectual Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is in the description of the main characters that Dreyer has been most selective in his adaptation, though his general view on such themes as tragic love relationships, female emancipation and marriage as a repressive institution remains the same as that of Söderberg.

#### The stylistic level

It has often been said that Dreyer's adaptation had nothing to do with Söderberg's play on a stylistic level: it was too stylized, missing Söderberg's irony and humour, and turning a naturalistic play into a slow, self-indulgent, over-pathetic tragedy.<sup>18</sup> But this could not be less true. Dreyer is certainly not exaggerating his artistic effects more than the poetic vein of Söderberg's work. To the same degree as Dreyer, Söderberg loved to use short, clear statements about how tragic life and love can be, often seasoned with a heavy dose of pathos. Moreover, this is not something we meet only in *Gertrud*: one could just as easily mention the famous line on the last page in *Dr. Glas*: "Mig gik livet forbi" ("Life passed me by", Söderberg, 1968 (1905), p. 144).<sup>19</sup> It is true, though, that the Söderbergian humour and irony can be quite difficult to discover in Dreyer's film. In his biography of Söderberg, Bure Holmbäck gives the following definition of the author's literary style:

[...]Söderberg makes use of concentration, the refined style, the strong control, as a component of his literary art [...] The tone is quiet, the tempo seldom in a hurry, the atmosphere is

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<sup>18</sup> One finds many examples of such criticism in Morten Piil, 2000, pp. 187-189.

<sup>19</sup> Another obvious example is the already-quoted poem in *Gertrud*: "Look at me..." etc.



relaxed. (Holmbäck, 1988, p. 32)

In every detail this is an exact description of the style we find in Dreyer's version of *Gertrud*. All the elements mentioned here are the same ones that Dreyer has been criticized for using over the years. Such criticism is absurd – because Dreyer's practice derived from his very admiration of Söderberg. Söderberg has described his authorship as “a thin but clear beam” (Sallnäss & Björck, 1973, p. 14), and this could easily be a description of Dreyer's career as a film director.

The long takes, in which the characters in the film do not look at each other while speaking, have also been criticized. When Dreyer defended this stylistic approach it is very interesting to see how he uses the fact that Söderberg's literary style had inspired him as the most important argument. He says:

I was inspired by Söderberg himself. He wrote time after time in his novels and plays – ‘They spoke past each other’. But secondly, it is unfortunately something that happens to a high degree in reality. (Drum & Drum, 2000, p. 257)

Dreyer therefore chose to use many of his typical stylistic elements in the film: the use of contrast, the slow tempo, the long takes and the distinct and hypnotic way for the characters to deliver their lines. But it is very clear to us that, while he preferred some typical Dreyer elements to others, it was Söderberg's works (not only *Gertrud*) that were always in his mind. One of the most typical and famous Dreyer style element, the close-up, is almost wholly absent in *Gertrud*. Dreyer's reason for rarely using this beloved technique was probably that he wanted to keep the same distance from his characters on a stylistic level as Söderberg often did on a thematic one.



Carl Th. Dreyer and Nina Pens rehearsing.

### The third way: The innovative and wilful adaptor

Through my analysis of Dreyer's adaptation of Söderberg's *Gertrud*, I hope to have shown how Dreyer to the very end of his career stayed faithful to the literary sources on which he based his films, and yet at the same time how he never wanted to compromise when it came to how the adaptation should be done. Dreyer was one of the greatest individualists in film history, always developing new ideas and visions, and therefore he chose to adapt only works that really meant something to him. He was first and foremost in-

terested in writers with whom he felt he had something in common. Söderberg was one of the writers for whom Dreyer had the greatest life-long admiration, and it is therefore possible in the film version of *Gertrud* to find a fine mixture between what is typical Dreyer and what is typical Söderberg; it was this interesting mixture that was so important to Dreyer.

Dreyer actually went even further than that in his last film: he not only based his film on the literary source but also on Söderberg's own biography. And he identified himself so much with the Swedish writer that he not only turned the Gabriel Lidman character into Söderberg's alter ego, but also into his own alter ego. As shown in the analysis of the description of the main characters, Dreyer certainly sometimes took some liberties in the way he interpreted Söderberg's characters, but he did so in his own modest and respectful way. In his final film he used the Gabriel Lidman character to sum up the main conflicts in his own work and life as an artist: the fight against hypocrisy in middle-class and upper-class marriage, the headstrong belief in love without compromise, and the choice to live and work in loneliness (and without financial support) rather than being dictated to by authorities (and film producers). Consequently, *Gertrud* is not only an adaptation of a specific play, it is also a portrait of the author Hjalmar Söderberg, the real Gertrud, Maria von Platen, and the film director Carl Th. Dreyer.

Though it will never be possible for us to hear Söderberg's opinion of Dreyer's adaptation (he died twenty-three years before the film was made), Söderberg's grandson, the Danish writer Henrik Stangerup, came up with a guess in a feature article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 1989:

What my grandfather would have said about Dreyer's film? That it was Dreyer's work, and that he and Dreyer had a lot in common (the interest in the "other" Jesus, the empathy for the Jews, the affection for the woman, the feminine, the dislike of reli-

gious and ideological intolerance, the lack of being pushy) but also were very different. (Stangerup, 1989)

What Dreyer shows us with his adaptation of *Gertrud* is a *third way* of looking at the film as an art form: one *can* actually be an innovative *auteur* and show respect for the old literary masters at the same time. And one doesn't stop with a simple, straightforward adaptation of a literary source, one should also find out something about the writer *behind* the work – and something about oneself as film director *in* the work! At the same time it is important always to try to go to the extreme to find a personal cinematic style that on one hand has never been seen before, on the other hand shows respect to the style of the author of the literary source. In that way Dreyer with this film probably showed the way for later Scandinavian directors such as Henning Carlsen (with his adaptation of Hamsun's *Hunger* (1966)) and Jan Troell (with his adaptation of Moberg's *The Emigrants* (1971-72)). What he taught them was a new director's ideal: the innovative and wilful adaptor.

[All references to the film *Gertrud* are to the American DVD version released by The Criterion Collection in 2001.]

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