

# *'Nats go home': modernism, television and three BBC productions of Ibsen (1971-1974)*

Article

Accepted Version

Smart, B. (2016) 'Nats go home': modernism, television and three BBC productions of Ibsen (1971-1974). *Ibsen Studies*, 16 (1). pp. 37-70. ISSN 1502-1866 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15021866.2016.1180869> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/71899/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15021866.2016.1180869>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15021866.2016.1180869>

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

**‘Nats go home’: Modernism, television and three BBC productions of  
Ibsen (1971-1974)**

In 1964 theatre journal *Encore* published ‘Nats go home’, a polemical article by television screenwriter Troy Kennedy Martin. The manifesto for dramatic techniques innovated at BBC Television in the 1960s subsequently proved highly influential and is frequently cited in histories of British television drama (Caughie 2000, Cooke 2003, Hill 2007). The article called for the rejection of naturalism in television drama, and for new modernist forms to be created in its place. Kennedy Martin identified ‘nat’ television drama as deriving from nineteenth century theatrical traditions, complaining that it looked “to Ibsen and Shaw for guidance” (23). This article examines how Kennedy Martin’s argument represented the possibilities of naturalist drama, investigating whether the modernist qualities in canonical nineteenth-century naturalist plays that had agitated theatrical audiences transferred to television production.

Kennedy Martin envisaged realist/ naturalistic forms of television drama being replaced by more experimental modernist ones. This anticipated development had close parallels with the modernist movement’s rise in the early twentieth century, often characterised (and historically presented as) breaking away from realist modes. This discussion is often marked by scepticism about theatre’s suitability as a medium for modernist art, repeated in turn by Kennedy Martin in relation to television drama. Parallels

between rejections of naturalism by the early twentieth century modernist movement and by Kennedy Martin in 1964 are explored in this article's first section. Section two examines three adaptations of Ibsen produced by the BBC in the 1970s, investigating how their approach tallies with the subjective characterisation, linear narrative and verbally-realised storytelling Kennedy Martin saw as inherent to 'nat' television drama.

### **'Nats go home'**

Kennedy Martin traced the roots of the dominant naturalist mode of television drama in the 1960s to American "television theatre" of the 1950s (1964, 21-2). Plays such as *Marty* (NBC 1953), comprised of heightened psychological studies of characters under extreme stress, highlighted the Stanislavskian method acting of performers trained at the Actors' Studio. The strength of dialogue and performance attained in this movement's best works led to audiences forgetting their essentially theatrical form, Kennedy Martin argued. Kennedy Martin distinguished British television plays as more concerned with "didactic Marxist" social and economic conditions than the "Freudian" psychological motivation of American plays, although both approaches depended upon following dramaturgically determinist views of characterisation deriving from "Shaw and Ibsen".

According to Kennedy Martin, naturalist plays achieved their effects through storytelling that gave primacy to the verbal over the visual; characters' interrelationships were achieved verbally; interior lives (relationships with God or nature) were revealed through refraction of verbal style; and abstract concepts (fear, hate, hope) could only be revealed "indirectly" through symbolism or dialogue. This verbal concentration gave precedence within plays to characters' interpersonal relationships that risked becoming "so strong that they overwhelm the original theme" (1964, 24). Such prioritisation of words and characterization was inimical to original television drama:

Despite what everyone may say to the contrary, naturalism is not a visual form. The bulk of the dramatic information rests on the dialogue and the visuals do nothing but supplement it. (1964, 27)<sup>i</sup>

Verbal narrative enslaved cameras into neutral two and three-shots of speakers and listeners, gazing "around the room following the conversation like an attentive stranger" (1964, 25). Concentration upon revelation of character through speech led to a close-up form of drama, in writing, direction and performance, that believed viewers' emotions could be engaged subjectively through close-up scrutiny of the face, an assumption Kennedy Martin thought misguided and "on a direct collision course with the objectivity of the camera" (1964, 25).

The naturalist play's other major narrative limitation lay in reliance upon stories told in linear time (1964, 24-5), leading to screen time wasted in exposition and establishing relationships between characters (1964, 27), untelevisual retrospective dialogue (1964, 28) and, being unable to jump between or distort time, a focus upon the present moment of drama, encouraging "the myth of the live transmission producing a spontaneity in the actor's performance, which is still held sacred in many quarters of television" (1964, 29).

In contrast to these perceived limitations Kennedy Martin advocated a new form of television drama, founded upon freedom of mobility for the camera and primacy of visual over verbal storytelling. Montage would enable directors to manipulate linear time, allowing important momentary events to occur in elongated duration, or perhaps reoccur from different perspectives (1964, 28). This new drama, manipulated and reconstituted from the written screenplay through editing and montage, would be "one hundred per cent a director's medium" (1964, 32). Such cultural change could not occur overnight, existing directors having grown accustomed to naturalist working practices, "bogged down for years in their subservience to 'nat' photography and have ceased to have real creative energy" (1964, 32).

Kennedy Martin considered television to be an inherently objective medium that allowed drama audiences to observe behaviour rather than enter inner lives, but that close-up intimate naturalist drama attempted to

engage its audience subjectively.<sup>ii</sup> The television camera's focus upon whatever bodies or properties it covered was indiscriminating, making all that it showed qualitatively equal (1964, 30).<sup>iii</sup> This tendency, especially when combined with verbal narrative, led to drama that moved viewers' imaginative responses along an objective "index of increasing interest", which rose through greater understanding of characters' interrelation through dialogue and plot machinations. Kennedy Martin considered such drama to be less successful at inducing emotional responses, "where the aim is to directly disturb the senses" (1964, 30). Through montage and juxtaposition the new drama could create this agitating response: if the camera made everything it showed qualitatively equal, then the best way to provoke emotional responses was through "wild editing" of these images, making viewers question the drama's reality.

Television drama's problematic subjectivity was seen (by Kennedy Martin) as resulting from its derivation from other media. Character's realisation through language (either through dialogue or interior consciousness revealed through symbolic and abstract speech) came from theatre. Kennedy Martin saw this reliance upon language as wrong, because inherently untelevisual. The style through which 'nat' television disseminated theatrical reliance upon the spoken word had not evolved through the specific form of the new medium itself, but been adopted from a Hollywood cinema that attempted to give audiences subjective insight into characters' feelings and concerns through the device of the close-up. Kennedy Martin

saw this cinematic style as inappropriate for television: “The fact is that outside of the area of the Hollywood square screen, this kind of subjectivity cannot be obtained” (1964, 29).

The crucial difference between television and film conditions lay in the television picture’s sharper (but more evenly distributed) focus, as distinct from the film image. This focus gave television pictures a more clinical quality, better suited to drama that could be interpreted objectively by its audience. Creating a new drama that worked this objectivity to its favour, dislocating images from naturalistic settings and presenting them as parts of a non-linear story, would require rethinking television technology. This new drama would require much greater concentration upon editing and post-production, making a directorially-mediated and assembled art form, taking primacy away from writer or actors (whose performances had been relayed directly to the audience engendering an empathetic sense of spontaneity). This emphasis upon the director would lead to a television drama that had much less affinity to theatre than ‘nat’ drama had done.

### **Modernism, naturalism and theatre**

Kennedy Martin’s polarity between naturalist and new drama continues to dominate discussion of British television drama from the 1960s to the 1980s, though the term 'naturalism' is often replaced by discussions of realism,



which has slightly different connotations of social realism and documentary. Caughie (2000) defines two opposing movements as realists and modernists, characterising Kennedy Martin's argument:

The 'nats' who are sent home by Troy Kennedy Martin are those who are content to dramatize content; the directors of the new drama are those who seek through objective form to dynamise and agitate the subjectivity of the viewer. (107)

The idea of “content” (themes or ideas dramatized through verbal communication of characters in linear time) is important to this history, “Shaw and Ibsen” being bad models for television writers. More impressionistic and abstract attempts to stimulate viewers’ feelings are the domain of modernist new drama, with its leeway to manipulate time and narrative. This view of television history that divides nats and non-nats into opposing camps, presupposes that theatrical naturalism was in itself a realist, and not a modernist, mode. This forms a reductive view of the naturalist theatrical canon, realist works that contain elements of modernist thought, strongly associated with the history of literary modernism.

The view of television history that sees a naturalist/realist drama usurped by more experimental modernism has clear parallels with literary and theatrical history of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Toril Moi suggests that (because of his reputation as realist artist) Ibsen has been

consistently undervalued by analysts of modernism and postmodernism<sup>iv</sup>, seen as a figure at the creation of modernism rather than a modernist (2006, 1). This neglect is attributed to Ibsen having worked in theatre (a literary form mistrusted by modernist academics because of its ties to mimeticism and narrative), and his canonical late plays being written in a realist idiom, (modernists perceiving realism as suspect).

Modernist writers and artists saw the playwright's role as one of compromised innovator, through their work's mediation to audiences via performers, "literally interpreted by actors whose techniques are normally already established and therefore liable to mould the final product in traditional ways" (Innes 1999, 131). Cinema directors have power to select aspects of performance that chime with their artistic vision and edit performances in a way that identifies films as their own interpretation, to a degree unavailable to playwrights. It is this individual vision Kennedy Martin aspired for the new television drama when he called for it to be "one hundred per cent a director's medium", an impossibility when television drama was produced in ways that privileged theatrical spontaneity of performance and 'liveness' (1964, 32).

Kennedy Martin's scepticism about television drama's ability to create subjective understanding of interior lives through close-up mirrors the modernist movement's scepticism about theatrical realisation of consciousness. Christopher Innes identifies depiction of interior life as a

major concern of literary modernism (Proust, Joyce, Woolf) “where reality is the subjective impression of the world, and art is an ‘impressionist’ record of ‘stream of consciousness’” (1999, 138). The tendency within theatre at the same time was an opposite one: towards exploration of character through *expressionism* that saw character represented externally through archetypes. Kennedy Martin’s new drama is closer to the expressionist model, television cameras’ inevitable objectivity better suited to representing character as seen than conveying interiority.

*Diary of a Young Man* (BBC TV, 1964), the television drama series co-written by Kennedy Martin and John McGrath that followed the precepts of ‘Nats go home’, attempted expressionist characterisation through separation of sound and vision, voice-over and placing characters in disparate scenes and situations that switched abruptly from grim to farcical (Cooke 2003, 65-6). This modernist approach provoked puzzlement, T. C. Worsley complaining of jarringly inconsistent register in the programme’s dialogue, with characters highly articulate in one scene but dull in the next (1970, 20). For such critics, expectation of the naturalist primacy of dialogue was automatically created through characters communicating by speech, creating subjective understanding for listeners that required consistent register and continuity with information established in previous scenes to create successful, convincing drama.

Moi suggests that realist theatrical conventions privileged the spoken word as primary means to convey narrative (as decried by Kennedy Martin), with the modernist movement philosophically sceptical towards belief in “reference”, language’s power to reflect reality: “If there is no guarantee that language is reliably connected to the world, the sceptic asks, then how can we trust anything put into words?” (Moi 2006, 23). Moi argues that Ibsen’s use of the spoken word questions and confuses fixed philosophical positions, giving his plays modernist self-awareness of their theatricality beyond surface realism. This modernist self-reflexivity is achieved through preoccupation with irony and scepticism (rooted in the continuing importance of the idealist movement in the late nineteenth-century) and an awareness of “theatricality” as an element within the worlds of the plays; “theatre as an art form is embraced and acknowledged”, “antitheatricalism is rejected”, “theatricality is criticised”, “self-theatricalisation in everyday life is a central theme” (Moi, 2006, 10).

Ibsen’s “theatricality” does not occur through breaking conventions of the fourth wall but his awareness of characters performing versions of themselves for each other’s benefit and their own self-image via different registers of speech. Different registers used between characters in *The Wild Duck* present multiple subjective interpretations of reality according to each character’s capability of dealing with everyday circumstances in the play’s realist setting; Gregers makes idealized statements, Hjalmar presents himself in self-dramatizing rhetorical “theatrical” language, Hedvig’s

comprehension of idealistic concepts is mediated through simple uneducated vocabulary, whilst Gina's speech is entirely prosaic, signifying little comprehension of Gregers' claims of the ideal (whilst keenly aware of their possible destructive effect).

Unlike the more directorially-mediated film, theatre is experienced in actual time in the same space by both actors and audience, making it difficult to "avoid the taint of mimeticism and narrative" (Moi 2006, 27). Innes explains why theatre has been problematic for modernism:

[T]heatre's intrinsic connection to physical reality and social existence (communicated at a minimum through the bodies of the actors and their relationships to each other) make some of the key modernist principles inapplicable. On the stage, art could neither assert itself as an autonomous activity, independent of external experience, nor aspire to pure form. In sharp contrast to the modernist drive in poetry or painting, imitation was always present, being the essential basis of acting. Simply presenting a series of actions in a temporal and spatial frame evoked the "narrative method" that Eliot rejected (...) Abstraction too only proved possible to a very limited degree. (1999, 131-2)

Innes suggests that theatre forms an institution in a way publishing houses do not, existing within a pre-set frame for performance. Even when performed in alternative spaces away from conventional stages, the nature of actor-audience relationships “automatically becomes interpreted in conventional forms” (1999, 131). Innes cites the Dadaists as an illustration of this process, where an aggressively nonsensical assault on bourgeois sensitivities became codified in the recognisable framework of cabaret form.<sup>v</sup> For creators of the new television drama, association of their work with theatrical values (such as the sense of spontaneous performance being relayed to the audience) would limit their recognition as original autonomous artists, hence Kennedy Martin’s wish to separate television drama from all forms of theatricality, not only linear naturalism.

This modernist self-reflexivity Moi identifies informs other writers’ critique of Ibsen’s plays, and provides further support to the view of Ibsen as dramatist in the Kennedy Martin mode, whose plays were inherently suited for modernist television interpretation. Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker (1989) consider *The Wild Duck* in its original theatrical context, arguing that the play presented many new challenges to its original directors, performers, and audiences; an “acute theatrical irony (the subtle mingling of comedy and seriousness in word, action and visual image), the far greater complexity of its character inter-relationships, and its deliberate diffuseness of focus all contributed to a performance challenge” greater than that presented by any other play of the period (127). Audiences’ imaginative involvement was presented with a new challenge by “this work’s

multiplicity of focus and its dynamic combination and juxtaposition of moods and impressions” (1989, 127). This imaginative effort of having to process associations and suggestions into a meaningful whole led to a new, more subjective, form of audience involvement, where spectators not only witnessed a play but actively participated in its emergence and assembly.

To describe the effect of Ibsen’s dramaturgy, Marker and Marker quote from a modernist filmmaker, citing Sergei Eisenstein’s 1942 discussion of the theory of montage:

The image planned by author, director and actor is concretized by them in separate representational elements, and is assembled – again and finally – in the spectator’s perception. (1999, 127)

This is precisely the same effect advocated by Kennedy Martin in his call for a move away from the ‘nat’ use of linear time, giving credence to Moi’s view that Ibsen’s realist art carries within it modernist perceptions of reality.

In its mobility of focus, shifting moods and tempos, and multiplicity of voices and registers, *The Wild Duck* held the ability to dynamise and agitate audiences’ subjective responses. This is the effect that Kennedy Martin hoped for the modernist new television drama, far more demanding upon the viewer than the verbal storytelling and static images he saw as the inevitable result of naturalist television drama.

## **Ibsen adaptations on BBC Television**

Writing in 1957, Michael Barry, the head of BBC Television drama could report that, “During the twenty-one years of BBC Television Drama there have been ten productions of nine plays by Ibsen and today this author has a nation-wide popularity” (1957, 3). These television productions stimulated an interest in the dramatic canon not previously known in Britain and attracted a much larger audience for Ibsen’s work than it had previously known in theatrical production, Barry claimed. This sense of Ibsen’s suitability for television adaptation in Britain lasted for over forty years, with 40 separate productions of his plays made and broadcast by the BBC and ITV between 1947 and 1993. The range of plays attempted during this period is remarkable, with all twelve late plays produced at least once, as well as one production of *Brand* (BBC, 1959) and two of *Peer Gynt* (BBC 1954, 1972).<sup>vi</sup>

The survival of three BBC Ibsen productions made in quick succession over three years from 1971-4, presents an opportunity to reappraise Kennedy Martin’s dismissal of naturalism and television adaptation of the naturalist stage play. Was Ibsen’s storytelling made to seem conventionally linear and verbal through television adaptation? Could studio production of these plays ever deviate from the model of the camera following dialogue around the room that Kennedy Martin perceived? If any attempt was made to break from this pattern, what effect did it have upon audiences? Were



productions of Ibsen plays closer Kennedy Martin's inherently untelevisual outside broadcast relays, or the disorientating experience for theatre audiences suggested by Marker and Marker?

***The Lady from the Sea* (BBC2, 5 March 1974, dir. Basil Coleman)<sup>vii</sup>**

Basil Coleman's<sup>viii</sup> 1974 production of *The Lady from the Sea* is the closest of the three adaptations to the conventional naturalist style decried by Kennedy Martin. The production is also highly faithful to the play's theatrical origins, replicating proscenium arch blocking and realistic set design within the television studio.

Writing about the live American "method school" television plays of the 1950s, Caughie (2000) suggests that;

the very 'limitations' of the studio - the narrow field, the constricted sets, the lack of fluidity in the camera – gave power to the focus on acting and character. (...) [This smallness of scale, at its best] was a style of drama which began to discover what might be specifically dramatic about live television, a style which sought to combine the immediacy of theatre with the intimacy of close-up film (73).

Although *Lady from the Sea* was pre-recorded, and its exterior setting was not particularly constricted, its static directorial style, emphasis upon closely

observed performances, and narrative and characterisation revealed through the spoken word can be said to belong in this tradition.

Coleman's production always attempts verisimilitude of design, more difficult in exteriors than interiors in a videotaped studio production, especially in Act Three's mountain pathway setting. This scenery attracted negative commentary in the internal BBC Audience Research Report, condemned as "'stagey' and unreal" in contrast to the play's one interior set, thought to have "created just the right 'crowded and stuffy' atmosphere one associated with the period" (BBC WAC VR/74/161).<sup>ix</sup> It is questionable whether (short of expensive location filming) this problematic artificiality could have been resolved in a production that recreated the play in a realistic setting, supporting Kennedy Martin's view of naturalism's unsuitability for the television camera's objective photography.

Coleman's theatrical technique in *Lady from the Sea* is marked by stasis, avoiding swooping camera movements or rapid mixing. Dialogue is spoken clearly and listened to intently; there are no claustrophobically intense close-ups. Performance style is muted, without demonstrative gestures or physical actions. This does not mean that Coleman's less innovative approach necessarily serves play or actors badly. A positive interpretation of *Lady from the Sea*'s acting style is that it is not dictated by directorial approach, Coleman's undemonstrative style serving to record actors' performances.<sup>x</sup>

This style favours mid-shots and long takes that do not particularly fit the description of camera following dialogue like an attentive stranger. Character interaction is often shown within a wider frame, holding performers in fixed positions, rather than through contrapuntal editing of speech and response. This holding of shots is most pronounced during Act One's important retrospective scene, where Lyngstrand recounts meeting the Stranger (an outsider to whom Ellida feels married) to Arnholm and Ellida. Coleman relocates this in a summerhouse, a more intimate location for private conversation than Ibsen's specified arbour. The scene is initially shot through windowpanes, with shadows of the roof across Arnholm and Ellida's faces and, once Lyngstrand enters and tells the story, shown through the doorway.<sup>xi</sup> A grouping is established of Lyngstrand's face in profile at the bottom left of frame, Ellida sat at one end of a bench by the doorway listening intently to Lyngstrand on the right, and Arnholm sat at the other end in mid-shot at the top centre. Thus established, the shot (rather than fleeting close-ups) becomes the foundation of viewer understanding. The scene's prolonged nature allows viewers to turn their attention and consideration to the reactions of each character in a sequence, and at a rate, not necessarily dictated by the director.

This approach expects that viewers of the scene will pay close attention to verbal delivery and inflections, especially as characters avoid eye contact during the exchange. The resulting stillness makes watching the scene close to the experience of viewing a theatrical performance, requiring spoken word and acting to give Lyngstrand's story resonance, rather than a

particular response being dictated through directorial choice of shots and camera movement. This is a textbook illustration of naturalist reliance upon word over image, as perceived by Kennedy Martin.

On several occasions gatherings of characters are presented standing in a straight line in tableau, giving credence to the production's perceived 'staginess'. This is particularly marked at the end, where all the play's united couples are shown in a conclusive still image resembling a theatrical curtain line. An advantage of Coleman's undemonstrative style is that, on the one occasion where the pattern is broken away from, a sense of surprise is created by the variation of technique. Upon the Stranger's long-awaited appearance in Act Three, the viewer is shown Ellida (crouched over a stagnant garden pond) from the Stranger's point of view, heightening tension and curiosity built-up as to his appearance, giving credibility to Ellida's faith in his return.

Apart from this moment, Coleman's production runs to a consistent rhythm, never noticeably speeding up. This steady pace and approach loses some of Ibsen's differentiation of mood and tone between alternating potentially tragic scenes with Ellida and ironic scenes of comic romance featuring her stepdaughters and their suitors.

Audience reaction to this static style was unenthusiastic. The Research Report relates complaints of a “heavy going” production with a “slow start” that prompted 45% of the audience to switch off before the end.<sup>xii</sup> Compilers attributed this dissatisfaction to discontent with Ibsen’s original play, suggesting that Coleman’s approach to adaptation was not seen as itself inappropriate. The report cites that “boredom with the play itself apparently caused a number of those reporting to view the acting and production with a somewhat jaundiced eye, the former being described as ‘stiff and wooden’” (BBC WAC VR/74/161). The survey reported general hostility towards Ibsen’s dramaturgy: “so much of his writing was obscure and symbolic that they were not always sure what he was saying,<sup>xiii</sup> and there was a ‘coldness’ about his plays which they found somewhat repellent”.

Although a proportion of every BBC Ibsen audience surveyed during this period expressed similar views, and *Lady from the Sea*’s very small audience led any view expressed to bear disproportionate weight, the way Ibsen’s symbolism is structured in this particular play may have provoked complaints of obscurity and coldness. Symbolism is located more evenly within the two other plays considered here. *The Wild Duck* is watermarked throughout by the governing motif of the duck itself, carrying different resonances for each character, a living creature depicted in the extra-textual attic menagerie setting in Bridges’ production, and a symbol audience are primed to consider from the outset by the title.<sup>xiv</sup> Ideas symbolic of the will to live and die are inherent to *Hedda Gabler*’s plotting and, in the case of the pistols, depicted at points during the play.

*Lady from the Sea*'s slow, verbal, exposition made the first two acts problematic for visual television adaptation, with the image of the Stranger developed through speech a long time before the character's eventual appearance. The problem of the Stranger only existing through telling and not showing for much of the play may have been exacerbated by Coleman's unobtrusive style and interpretation, alienating a large proportion of the audience, supporting Kennedy Martin's assertion of retrospective verbal narrative's unsuitability for television. By the play's end the idea of the Stranger becomes one of Ibsen's least obscure or cold symbolic devices; not obscure because actually physically manifested on stage, serving a clear narrative purpose; and not cold because his appearance and rejection causes an unexpectedly happy resolution. But the nature of Ibsen's slow-building narrative and Coleman's patient, undemonstrative, directorial style left much of the adaptation's audience associating the play with the adverse qualities of obscurity and coldness.

Coleman's uniformity of style may have resulted in much of the play's substantial comedy being unapparent to the audience. A further reason may be the lack of communal engagement that theatre audiences would experience, where noticeable responses of amusement or surprise in sections of the audience can be picked up on and added to by others. It is hard to see how television adaptation could circumvent this, supporting Kennedy Martin's view of the two mediums' incompatibility.

***Play of the Month: Hedda Gabler* (BBC1, 20 October 1972, dir. Waris Hussein)<sup>xv</sup>**

Waris Hussein's<sup>xvi</sup> direction of *Hedda Gabler* exemplifies Kennedy Martin's understanding of 'nat' style: the camera follows the dialogue's lead around the rooms of the Tesman house, and character is revealed subjectively through large intimate close-ups. Yet this production's effect upon viewer empathy and imagination achieves greater complexity than in Kennedy Martin's model.

Törnqvist (1999) notes that *Hedda* contains Ibsen's most detailed stage directions, included largely for the benefit of the original published text's readers, rather than the eventual performance text's spectators. A theatrical audience would be unable to see such details as Hedda's "steel-grey" eyes or Mrs Elvsted's "light blue, large and somewhat prominent" ones (66), whilst readers of the printed text might be able to associate the steel of Hedda's eyes with her pistols. While Hussein did not follow details about eye colour to the letter, certain directions concerning facial expression, such as Hedda smiling "almost imperceptibly" (Ibsen 1995, 264) could be more fully appreciated through a television production's close-up style than by theatrical audiences.

Ibsen's extremely precise directions as to when and where characters sit, rise and gesture to each other are closely followed. These directions retain their precision (in indicating how characters position themselves and respond to each other) when magnified by being seen much closer than possible for theatrical audiences, but the proximity also makes watching these characters a more tactile experience than in the other adaptations. This closeness applies as much aurally as visually: a large part of the uncomfortable intimacy achieved in the scene of Hedda and Lovborg talking to each other (while ostensibly looking at a photograph album while Tesman and Brack drink together) is because the viewer is privy to a "softly" (1995, 289) spoken conversation. Janet Suzman and Tom Bell perform this too quietly to be audible in a theatre auditorium, making realization of *sotto voce* whispering less of a well-worn convention, and closer to the reality of how people speak when they do not want to be noticed or overheard.

Hussein's close-up style can be an uncomfortable experience for the viewer. The use of single camera close-up shots (that follow the action of dialogue by shifting focus as performers move around) induces a sense of being in the room, looking over the characters' shoulders. The most extreme example occurs at the end of Act Two when Hedda is alone with an anxious Mrs Elvsted, whom she forcibly induces to stay and take tea with her. Ibsen's directions for this scene state that Hedda "clasps" Elvsted "passionately" and "drags" her "almost forcibly towards the open doorway" (1995, 299). Elvsted's alarm is shown in her lines, "Let me go! Let me go!"



You frighten me, Hedda!” Hussein’s realization of this scene shows Hedda violently spinning Elvsted around and pulling at her hair, shot in close-up. The effect of this proximity makes the action seem un-choreographed and sudden; both performers veer out of shot, meaning that the viewer has to concentrate on the screen to follow the characters’ reactions, making the camera movement that follows the performers appear unplanned. This spontaneous impression has a different effect to that of Kennedy Martin’s attentive stranger following conversation in the room. That style, characterised as two- and three-shots that slavishly follow dialogue and reaction, is more sedate than Hussein’s mobile effect. Where Kennedy Martin’s implied bystander would be sat or stood in a fixed position in the room, moving their head to observe speakers and listeners, an eyewitness in the camera’s position in Hussein’s adaptation would be physically following characters, picking up gestures and inflections that do not always tally with the spoken dialogue. This increased mobility and closeness also gives priority to spontaneity and ‘liveness’ of performance: Hedda and Elvsted pushing each other out of shot is not a premeditated choreographic act, but emphasises the characters’ changing status within the play.

This technique magnifies the effect of small, tactile, movements and gestures that would be too small for a theatre audience to notice, such as Hedda’s disdainful flicking of flowers presented to her by Elvsted. Hedda’s archly dismissive disposal of cigarette butts is also accentuated by the use of close-up, conveying a certain bored, aloof, quality. When such expressive close-up gestures are combined with the use of dangerous properties, the

effect is emphatic. When Hedda shoots at the judge through the window the image is shown in a close-up of Hedda holding both pistols and laughing, demonstrating her ease in handling, and pleasure in using, the weapons. In Alex Segal's 1962 BBC production this scene is in long shot, with the viewer's understanding is concentrated upon the objective action of shooting rather than subjective consideration of Hedda's motivation. In Segal's version the viewer learns that Hedda is the type of woman who shoots out of the window to attract visitors' attention, but is only given Ibsen's dialogue to try to understand why she might do so, whereas Hussein's focus upon performer rather than action provides greater insight into how Hedda might feel about what she is doing. This physicality and gesture of performance, and the way that close, mobile, camera-work frames it, illuminates how characters perceive and present themselves, as opposed to showing how they respond to each other.

The naturalist television camera style Kennedy Martin outlined, that attempts to make the viewer achieve subjective understanding of character, derived from classical Hollywood cinema (1964, 25). By contrast, the effect Hussein achieves through close-ups, often depicting characters midway through performing actions and revealed as part of a mobile shot, works objectively upon the viewer. Insight gained into Hedda's boredom encourages objective understanding into her psychological motivation, as opposed to subjective empathy, as was created by cinematic close-ups of Ingrid Bergman's face and non-diegetic incidental music in Segal's 1962 version.

The impartial response encouraged by this objectivity is intensified by the production's blunt and stylized performances. Hedda's concerns are represented by a series of skittish movements that recur when certain aspects of her life are referred to. Whenever pregnancy is mentioned she starts to gag nauseously and whenever placed under particular stress she sits in a rocking chair that she rocks vigorously, an action always shown in profile. The most extremely stylized performance in the play is Ian McKellen's Tesman, who is made a physically unattractive, almost repulsive, man. McKellen gives Tesman such grotesque characteristics as hunched back, clubfoot, squint and uncomprehending beetle brow, a voice that stammers and barks, and the unpleasant habit of persistent pipe sucking.<sup>xvii</sup> Although McKellen's is the most distinctively physically exaggerated of the five main characters, this stylized pitch is shared by all the major performers: Janet Suzman's movement and intonation as Hedda is realized in constant restless actions, and slightly mocking relish in her vocal tone; Jane Asher's Elvsted has extremely stiff and imposing movements; and Tom Bell's Lovborg continually stares into the eyes of other characters, and speaks very slowly and deliberately; all four parts are realized through heightened physicality and gestures. The effect of such stylized performance is magnified by the objectivity of the television camera perceived by Kennedy Martin, which picks up each detail of a body or object with the same focus, discouraging empathy with such grotesquely depicted characters. When shown in close-up such stylized performances have the effect of encouraging the audience to understand characters' motivations, and how they gain or lose power and status through their words and actions.

Any empathy that the audience feels is gained through objective intellectual understanding of behaviour and circumstance, rather than the cinematic subjectivity Kennedy Martin saw in the ‘nat’ close-up.

Viewer reaction was highly favourable. The more specific evaluation system briefly used in the early 1970s suggests that the interpretation succeeded in engaging its audience’s attention and interest:

Thoroughly entertaining	48%	21%	17%	10%	4%	Very boring
Very easy to understand	46%	31%	13%	7%	3%	Very difficult to understand
Excellent plot	46%	27%	15%	7%	5%	Poor plot
Definitely out-of-the-ordinary	44%	29%	15%	6%	6%	Just ordinary

(BBC WAC VR/72/617)

It was felt that the play adapted particularly well for television, one viewer reporting that, “Ibsen’s essentially domestic dramas are especially suited to the domestic medium”. Particular praise was given to Janet Suzman who, in a drama that offered “plenty of scope for spectacular acting”, was found to be “most convincing. HG really looked as if she would make people dance to her tune”, with viewers commending her performance over Bergman ten years before, who had “failed to understand the depth of passion. Responses suggest that Hussein’s mobile camera style succeeded in following Ibsen’s precise instructions as to how the space of the room dictated drama that

occurred within it, “scenery and other details of production had very successfully conveyed the sombre mood of the play and an authentic sense of period, costumes in particular being noted as not only effective but very attractive”, creating suitable conditions for emotionally-charged performances that viewers accepted as compelling and plausible.

Hussein’s production is textually faithful to Ibsen’s sequencing and features no significant omissions. One extra-textual scene is added during the opening credits, showing Tesman asleep in bed and Hedda getting up, followed by shots of Hedda walking through, and sitting in, empty rooms of her house, shown through the panels of exterior windows. The addition of these alters the viewer’s initial perspective of Hedda from that given by Ibsen in stage productions. In Ibsen’s text, Hedda is not introduced for several minutes, but frequently discussed by other characters. This device allows intrigue about the offstage Hedda, and curiosity to see her, to grow. When Hedda does eventually appear, Ibsen’s stage directions indicate an imposing figure, described as, “Distinguished, [with an] aristocratic face and figure. Her complexion is pale and opalescent. Her eyes are steel-grey, with an expression of cold, calm serenity” (1995, 251-2), holding out her hand regally to Tesman’s aunt. By showing Hedda (literally) with her hair down prior to this entrance, Hussein adds an additional context to that written by Ibsen. While dialogue preceding her entrance makes Hedda out to be a woman of great style and fearsome exactitude, the figure seen in the early morning is vulnerable and solitary, escaping from her husband to be alone in an unfamiliar home. This extra-textual sequence introduces Hedda

in such a way as to place the viewer in the position of a spy. Her face is never seen clearly in this sequence, her solitary actions of walking, sitting, and drinking convey no obvious motivation in themselves, and the shutters and bars of the windows through which Hedda is seen present a literal barrier to building up any identification with her. Although Hedda is shown in private, the effect for the viewer is unsettlingly voyeuristic and objective, providing understanding of circumstances rather than insight into inner life.<sup>xviii</sup>

This quickly intercut wordless sequence of Hedda is an occasion where Hussein's production resembles Kennedy Martin's envisaged new drama, rather than conventional 'nat' form. It disrupts linear time through concentrating several hours of a morning into a minute, depends upon the primacy of the image above the word, and presents character objectively through voyeuristic depiction of Hedda as observed through windows. Critic Sean Day-Lewis saw the different narrative style created by this extra-textual scene as counterproductive (1972). While commending Hussein's "orthodox and competent account", Day-Lewis described the scene in terms of physical characterisation:

Fussy George Tesman, Hedda's husband of six months was observed to be snoring in his single bed while she prowled restlessly beside the window, like some well-bred racehorse frustrated by the walls of the marriage trap. This wordless scene told all, and because it told all, nullified a large part of the play, which revealed the

characters in action gradually and with such a cunning sense of timing. (13)

This criticism throws into question the suitability of most television adaptations: when closely-observed televisual images could render much stage exposition unnecessary, the implication is that either the adaptation should be rigorously faithful to text in framing the source narrative in a theatrical style, or should move further away from textual fidelity to replace words with telling images, as proposed by Kennedy Martin.

***Play of the Month: The Wild Duck* (BBC1, 21 March 1971, dir. Alan Bridges)**

Of the three adaptations, Alan Bridges<sup>xix</sup> 1971 production of *The Wild Duck* deviates most from 'nat' style. Through downplaying the primacy of dialogue, its awareness of sound editing, reconstitution of the source play's time and settings, and camera mobility, it shares many affinities with Kennedy Martin's advocated new drama and, through its adoption of the studio as location for cinematic experimentation in technique, can be read as a moment of change in the historical development of the theatrical adaptation. In this section these techniques and innovations in editing technology that made them practicable in the studio are discussed, attempting to establish to what extent they were innate within Ibsen's play,

as suggested by Marker and Marker's (1989) citation of Eisenstein. The (atypically) polarised audience response is also examined, attempting to discern what elements of the theatrically realised play might have been lost in the process of adaptation.

Bridges' approach to narrative in *The Wild Duck* appears defined by new possibilities created by changes in the pattern of studio recording in the early 1970s, a period which saw rehearse-recording of television drama introduced at the BBC. Previously, recording a full-length play (which usually required three full studio days) generally consisted of two and a half days of detailed camera rehearsals, followed by a few hours actual recording during the final evening.<sup>xx</sup> Material recorded tended to be performed 'as live' in complete, lengthy scenes normally only interrupted because of technical errors or serious mistakes by performers that would adversely affect the eventual programme.<sup>xxi</sup> Rudimentary editing technology, and limited time and resources available for post-production, discouraged directors from planning elaborate cuts or location changes not immediately achievable through live mixing of shots from multiple cameras during studio recording. This meant that dramas were often filmed sequentially making stage plays, designed for live continuous performance, particularly suitable for production.

*The Wild Duck's* conflation of Acts One and Two demonstrates the narrative possibilities created by the new technology. Scenes of Hjalmar at



Hakon Werle's party are intercut with scenes of his wife and daughter awaiting his return home. Showing these events occurring simultaneously creates a contrasting rhythm; the crowded frame and chaotic chattering soundtrack of the dinner party alternates starkly with the quiet industry of the mother and daughter. This conflation of two time schemes edited into one is an example of the more fluid sense of linear time Kennedy Martin hoped for (1964, 28).

The two settings' colour schemes are starkly differentiated. Although the night time setting means that both locations are dark and dingy, the Werle household has an orange tinge of artificial candle and lamplight while the frugal Ekdal house is lit by a solitary lamp and given a prevailing scheme of green and grey. The intertwined narrative places greater immediate importance upon Hjalmar than in Ibsen's text, showing both his pained ineffectuality in action and importance to others dependent upon him. The integrated use of contrasting lighting, sound and editing exemplifies the type of production Kennedy Martin called for, inextricably linking the three elements to serve a dramatic purpose (1964, 32) to an extent not apparent in *The Lady from the Sea* or *Hedda Gabler*.

This more fluid editing and cutting expands *The Wild Duck* beyond the confines practicable in most theatres. Ibsen's script is set in two rooms: Hakon's "expensively and comfortably furnished" study (1994, 117), and Hjalmar's attic studio. Bridges' expansive production adds supplementary rooms to both houses. In addition to Werle's study, the viewer is now

shown scenes in his hallway, dining room and billiard room; while Hjalmar's studio is augmented by kitchen, guest bedroom, boxroom, Old Ekdal's quarters and loft. These additional sets can be divided into two separate categories, each serving a different purpose; settings for extra-textual scenes not shown in Ibsen's original play, and for relocated encounters and incidents within the text.

The most striking use of extra-textual additions occurs in the production's initial minutes. In Ibsen's text, the play starts with conversation between a servant and waiter describing events (heard but not seen by the theatrical audience) at Hakon's dinner party:

From the dining room can be heard the buzz of conversation and laughter. Someone taps a knife against a glass; silence; a toast is proposed, cries of 'Bravo!'; then the buzz of conversation begins again. (1994, 117)

In Bridges' television version the audience sees the dinner party happen. Although soundtracked by excited chatter, the conversation's inaudibility means that the scene includes no dialogue additional to Ibsen's text. The new scene's emphasis is placed upon introducing Hjalmar, showing his awkwardness in social situations. A series of mobile shots around the dining table present the engaged and active faces of guests before the camera turns to show Hjalmar, much less at ease than other diners, failing to attract attention by speaking too late to join in conversation. The scene's narrative emphasis is altered away from the actual spoken word, and towards

impressionistic understanding of the collective mood and Hjalmar's failure to fit into expected rituals of social intercourse.

Bridges' visual grammar for these initial scenes noticeably differs from that subsequently used in Acts Two to Five. There is little use of close-up and shots are either mobile (moving across rooms and through crowds) or swiftly mixed together. Both party and household scenes are marked by chaotic, disrupted, rhythm. Characters at the party constantly rise up mid-conversation and go somewhere and do something else. Similarly, in Gina and Hedvig's quieter, more muted, domestic scenes both rise from their sewing to visit and fetch items from boxroom and kitchen. A contrast between the social and private spaces of party and home is established, but editing and constant movement makes events in both locations nervous and fidgety. This technique emphasises Hjalmar's catalysing moment of humiliation, when Hakon leads his dissolute old father through the party, in a way unachievable on a proscenium stage: the sight of the embarrassing old man shepherded and stumbling through the crowded room is shown from Hjalmar's point of view, over the shoulders of other guests. These scenes, observing how characters operate in social situations, create an objective effect upon the viewer, rather than the subjective sense of interiority achieved through close-up and character revealed through verbal articulation. The chaotic sense of disruptive rhythm and motion is paralleled by the party scene's use of noise supplementary to dialogue. At no point does the background party chatter cease during these sequences, Gregers

and Hjalmar's initial exchanges spoken up over a continual backdrop of noise.

Having established a distinctive style and tempo, moments when Bridges relaxes this rhythm emphasise crucial points in the narrative. Once Hjalmar returns home close-ups start to appear, dialogue becomes less frenetically paced, and characters appear more at ease in each other's company and prepared to listen to each other undisturbed domestic quiet than in the preceding party scenes.<sup>xxii</sup> This culminates in a unique moment of grace that indicates how the Ekdals have functioned as a family up to this point; Hjalmar plays his flute ("with spirit, in a slow and mournful tempo, and sensitively", Ibsen 1994, 144) for Gina and Hedvig;<sup>xxiii</sup> during which Hjalmar stands in the centre of frame, with Gina working at the table to the right, and Hedvig rocking in a chair in time to the music on the left.

An audacious and prolonged camera movement accompanies this moment; initially moving outwards to show the grouping within the entire space of the room, then slowly zooming inwards towards Hedvig's delighted face in close-up, then unexpectedly moving upwards towards the attic where the wild duck is kept. This movement is abruptly interrupted by Gregers's fateful knock at the door, the sound that leads to the rest of the play's (eventually tragic) action, and the image cuts back to the disrupted grouping of all three family members. This wide shot of the entire room is far from Kennedy Martin's conventional 'nat' presentation of relationships,

conveying important insight into the Ekdal family without verbal communication, but through grouping of characters and music. The transformation from whole room to close-up to attic through camera mobility makes the scene's realisation unlike *The Lady from the Sea's* replicated stage conditions.

After this peaceful moment, the tragic series of events set in motion by Gregers' truth-telling exchanges with Hjalmar are reflected by Bridges' decision to make subsequent Ekdal household scenes noisy and uncomfortable. Sounds of running taps or scraped plates make dialogue hard to pick up during kitchen scenes (not a location in Ibsen's text). Hedvig's distressed conversation with Gina (the last moments she is seen in Ibsen's text) is heard over the sound of Hjalmar banging chests and cases as he packs to leave home.

A striking moment of disrupted rhythm occurs during Hjalmar and Gina's Act Four argument. In Ibsen's text, this confrontation's dialogue alternates between Hjalmar and Gina, but in Bridges' production the dialogue overlaps, spoken by both simultaneously. This device creates the symphonic effect of two voices speaking at the same time (with simultaneous speech halving the amount of time which the argument takes) but also means that many listeners can only pick out, at most, half of the words spoken. This rebalances the scene's emphasis: giving greater impressionistic sense of characters' heightened emotions, but diminishing ability to follow

exposition contained within the dialogue, changing the narrative from verbal to visual and aural.

Similar unconventional vocal delivery in Bridges' production is found in the alcoholic Old Ekdal's dialogue, entirely mumbled and un-enunciated in a manner that would be inaudible in most theatre auditoria, without microphones or the audience being close enough to lip-read. The production's performance styles are generally more muted than those a theatre audience, without the magnifying potential of television microphones and cameras, might expect to encounter. Rosemary Leach's Gina, in particular, is very undemonstrative, presenting watchful stoicism through quiet speech and very still physical presence, in contrast to Jenny Agutter's gawky and enthusiastic adolescent movement as Hedvig, and the anxiety and inability to concentrate conveyed by Denholm Elliott's exasperated movement as Hjalmar.

Audience response to the programme's muted and chaotic aesthetic was mixed. "(V)iewers were asked to rate the broadcast on four dimensions defined by pairs of adjectives or descriptive phrases":

Absorbing	29%	20%	11%	11%	29%	Didn't hold attention
Entertaining	25%	20%	17%	13%	25%	Boring
Stimulating	23%	21%	16%	13%	27%	Made no impact

Convincing    34%   14%   22%   13%   17%   Unconvincing

(BBC WAC VR/71/68)

These statistics show polarised opinion to a much greater degree than Hussein's *Hedda Gabler*.<sup>xxiv</sup> Bridges' approach provoked either great attention or stimulation in viewers, or great irritation, with neutral responses comparatively rare, suggesting success by Kennedy Martin's criteria, agitating an engaged response, rather than neutral acceptance. Many viewers reported finding the production generally convincing, but a substantial percentage found it lacking impact, boring, and unable to hold their attention. The report's compilers sought to establish whether this hostility was towards Ibsen's original play or the television production, prefacing their précis of hostile responses, "The usual recoil from anything approaching morbidity was obviously a factor that influenced many reporting viewers to a considerable extent".

The compilers' report conveys frustration with those parts of the audience unfamiliar with theatrical narrative conventions: "many supplying evidence were either too impatient or unable to appreciate that the impact of the final tragedy depends upon the gradual build-up of the plot and characterisation". This argument places the onus of blame upon viewers for their perceived lack of understanding, rather than upon faults in either the production or Ibsen's source play. This assumption contrasts with Kennedy Martin's

belief in the inherent unsuitability of theatrical drama for television adaptation. Notes that others “were relieved to find that ‘this classic piece’ was within their grasp, and though undoubtedly gloomy, had proved less abstruse and esoteric than they had feared” counter this section of the audience’s lack of appreciation, suggesting that stage plays of this period could be presented to unfamiliar and sceptical audiences with positive results.

Complaints about Hjalmar’s “selfishness and failure to understand the feelings of his wife and daughter” developing at “a maddeningly slow pace” might read as criticism of Ibsen’s narrative technique, but also as censure of Bridges’ decision not to substantially cut much of the text in adapting the play. It is hard to gauge whether displeasure expressed over “the amount of ‘exposition conversations’ (also described as “a clutter of ‘over dialogue’”) in the early scenes” was the result of Ibsen’s dramatic technique, or because Bridges’ disruptive style made this exposition hard to follow. The preponderance of such exposition in initial scenes (provoking “doubts as to whether anyone totally unfamiliar with the play would manage to sustain interest”) suggests that transferring such theatrical dialogue to television was seen as inherently problematic.

The report privileges insights provided by the minority of viewers already familiar with the play; “one or two” of whom “ventured to say that ‘a certain mysterious quality’ was enhanced in the transition to the TV screen”.



The chosen adjective “mysterious” to describe qualities of *The Wild Duck* enhanced by adaptation suggests that viewers responded to two complementary aspects of Bridges’ production. Firstly that the duck’s actual depiction and characters’ responses to it, made allusive and poetic qualities seem more concrete and fully-realised to audiences than previously: and secondly that muted domestic performances, presented in lifelike disrupted rhythms, made characters appear more realistic to these viewers than in the theatre. Once convinced of the realism of the play’s characters and their world, audiences were more prepared to accept that mysterious symbolist and poetic elements could affect lifelike characters’ behaviour. One viewer noticed the rearranging of material at the beginning of the play, disapproving the greater expositional confusion this caused, reporting that, “the start seemed bad, as the important opening scene which explains the situation was inserted later”.<sup>xxv</sup>

Some of the audience saw Bridges’ techniques as anti-theatrical, with the play’s point becoming lost in the process of adaptation, transforming *The Wild Duck* into an avant-garde presentation disrespectful of the original text. A *Radio Times* letter is headed “Ibsen in the Modern Way”:

Perhaps I lack the necessary brain or whatever quality is required to understand a modern version of Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, but what with all the actors speaking at once on several occasions I was tempted to switch off. I know that the director is esteemed in TV circles and will probably win an award, but to have treated words in

such a way ruined the play for me. This seems to be a modern trend, and some people claim we do not communicate by words any more. I do, and we do not all speak at once in our house, nor can I remember Ibsen's characters having done so – not when I read the plays or last listened to them. P. S. Howe, Irchester, Northamptonshire. (5 April 1971, 58)

This argument reads Bridges' disrupted rhythms as themselves disrupting Ibsen's narrative coherence, with overlapping dialogue serving not to make the production more realistic but self-consciously "modern" and obscure. The techniques place greater emphasis on characters' struggle for words; when people decide to speak or not, how alcohol affects speech patterns, and how people talk over each other; but insights into the process of speaking also make the actual words spoken less audible. This view of the adaptation precisely parallels Kennedy Martin's call for a move away from the primacy of verbal communication in verbal drama: as the letter states, "some people claim we do not communicate by words anymore". Script editor Rosemary Hill's reply to these criticisms in the *Radio Times* letters page reflects Moi's arguments for Ibsen's modernism:

In transferring famous plays from another medium and another age to the television screens of today, all of us are constantly concerned that the immediacy and importance of a great play should not be too greatly softened by 'staginess' in the wrong sense. Sometimes a director or an adaptor may take extreme means to try to make a play

live for the new audience, and I think this was the case in *The Wild Duck*. But the play was certainly alive and kicking, and as ‘modern’ as I am sure Ibsen intended. (5 April 1971, 58)

*The Wild Duck*'s disrupted rhythms were also questioned by Raymond Williams in *The Listener* who saw moving away from single-room settings as misunderstanding the metaphorical simplicity of depicting characters stuck together in a single room (1971, 460). Williams saw Bridges' production as less powerful than another adaptation of a single room naturalist play shown in the same week, Arthur Miller's *The Price* (NBC, *Hallmark Hall of Fame*, 1971):

The importance of this trapped, static quality was brought out, negatively, by the recent restless production of *The Wild Duck* (BBC1). I have only recently been noticing, in television drama (though it used to happen a lot on stage), how superficially many directors understand movement. In one short speech an actor is often made to run a kind of race against time: how many positions, chairs, drinks, postures, rooms he can get through before the bloody words run out. But whether standing still and feeling trapped is now acceptable or not, is what Ibsen, in that period, and Miller, in *The Price*, were writing: a precise experience in a precise rhythm. And then the Miller production was very powerful, with the actors allowed to be slow and involved – an opportunity they brilliantly took. (1971, 460)

Williams sees Ibsen's original text of *The Wild Duck* as containing precise dramatic rhythm in itself, with Bridges' additions serving as a directorial nervous tic, diverting viewers' attention away from situations experienced by the play's characters and towards techniques of those performers enacting them. In this argument, mysterious impulses felt by characters are rendered less convincing by disrupted domestic rhythms, with poetic elements better realised through less mobile performances which display more thoughtful and considered delivery of dialogue, such as in Coleman's production of *The Lady from the Sea*. Bridges does attempt such quieter moments in his adaptation, but structures the production to alternate swift and slow movements.<sup>xxvi</sup> Camera movement at the beginning of Act Three, where Hjalmar abandons his work as characters constantly move between studio, kitchen and attic, is initially chaotic, implicating the spectator as a participant in the action as at a theatrical promenade performance. Then, once Hjalmar disappears to the attic and leaves Hedvig to carry out his work for him, her conversation with Gregers, with its mysterious references to sacrifice, is depicted through quieter performances and less frenetic camera movement.

It is questionable if the spatial awareness experienced by the theatrical audience looking at a realistic set could be experienced by television viewers, and Bridges' adaptation goes some way beyond imitation or replication of theatrical performance conditions. Bridges chose not to recreate theatrical conditions in *The Wild Duck*, deciding instead to open up the world of the play. Through doing this, the way that the play realised

verbally-posited ideas of enclosure and the hidden changed, making *The Wild Duck* a more literal work. For Williams, this resulted in the play losing some of its precision and metaphorical strength, while some of the BBC's reporting panel discovered a sense of concrete meaning in *The Wild Duck* they may not have otherwise found. For both parties the process of television adaptation, realised through Bridges' modernist, non-'nat', style, altered the play's meaning.

## **Conclusion**

Kennedy Martin (1964) saw naturalism as an anti-televisual form of dramatic narrative and called for the creation of a new, modernist, television drama in its place. The aspects of naturalism he saw as unsuitable for television were; reliance upon conveying plot and characterisation through spoken word as opposed to visual image; and dependence upon telling stories within linear time. 'Nat' television drama attempted to depict character subjectively through close-up technique derived from classical Hollywood cinema, while Kennedy Martin argued that the television camera's undifferentiating focus would be better utilised attempting to create objective characterisation.

A second strand of Kennedy Martin's argument against 'nat' television drama displays a wider antipathy towards the adoption of all forms of theatricality, especially the adaptation of theatrical plays. For Kennedy Martin, broadcasting stage plays on television could only be justified as an exercise in relaying information about a separate, incompatible, art form, made by Outside Broadcast units rather than television drama practitioners. This scepticism about theatricality echoes the historical critical antipathy towards theatre amongst the modernist movement, with mistrust of traditional theatrical performance's 'liveness' and textual basis integral to both early twentieth century modernist thought and Kennedy Martin's clarion call for new forms of television drama.

Kennedy Martin's characterisation of stage naturalism is based around a reductive view that denies the elements of modernism contained within such drama. Ibsen's canonical naturalist stage plays are not exclusively characterised by subjective psychological studies of character realised through dialogue within a linear time frame, which Kennedy Martin's argument suggests. These plays also act to challenge the conception of the world as defined by the spoken word and, by presenting multiple ways to understand characterisation, agitate spectators' perceptions of events and character.

Each of the three case studies of Ibsen productions considered test to what extent modernist elements could be accentuated through television adaptation, and whether audiences responded in the subjective or objective states set out by Kennedy Martin. By replicating theatrical staging and blocking, and in its unobtrusive directorial style *The Lady from the Sea* most closely matches the model of 'nat' drama. *Hedda Gabler* deviates from this form to some extent. The intense closeness of Waris Hussein's direction can be read as breaking from stage convention, becoming closer to the 'reading text' identified by Törnqvist. The close-up intimacy of performers cannot be said to derive from the subjective classical Hollywood presentation of character Kennedy Martin saw as unsuitable for television (adopted in the 1962 BBC version), but instead utilises the television camera's cold objectivity, as he wished for the new drama. Bridges' production of *The Wild Duck* is realised in a modernist style. The spoken word's primacy is undermined through overlapping dialogue, character is revealed visually and aurally through disrupted routines, editing condenses time, and mobile camera movement disorientate and agitate the viewer rather than follows dialogue around the room.

The elements of production *Hedda Gabler* and *The Wild Duck* share with the new drama advocated by Kennedy Martin question the purpose and reasoning behind television adaptation. The relayed outside broadcasts of stage plays seen by Kennedy Martin as televised theatre's only valid form would look nothing like *Hedda Gabler* or *The Wild Duck*. Day-Lewis' view of *Hedda Gabler*'s extra-textual opening sequence as invalidating much of

Ibsen's subsequent Act One dialogue, or the loss of metatheatrical aspects of the Ekdal home<sup>xxvii</sup> in Bridges' extended setting of *The Wild Duck*, suggest that whenever adaptation altered precise details of canonical naturalist plays, the effects of stage dramaturgy would always be reconstituted into something different upon the television audience. That different something, however, need not have been the distortion of theatricality, or the lack of confidence in televisuality, that Kennedy Martin saw as being the inevitable result of television adaptation.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is one of the outcomes of the research project "The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK", funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council from 2013-16.



## References

- Auerbach, Erich. 1953. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barry, Michael, 'Television World Theatre', *Radio Times*, 27 December 1957: 3.
- Bentley, Eric. 1953. *In Search of Theater*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Caughie, John. 2000. *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism & British Culture*. Oxford: Oxford.
- Cooke, Lez. 2003. *British Television Drama: A History*, London: BFI.
- Day-Lewis, Sean. 1972. Hedda Gabler spoilt by scene at start. *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 October: 13.
- Hill, John. 2007. A 'new drama for television'?: Diary of a Young Man. In *Experimental British Television*, eds. Mulvey, Laura and Sexton, Jamie, 48-69. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ibsen, Henrik. 1980. *Ibsen Plays: Three*. London: Methuen.
- Ibsen, Henrik. 1994. *Ibsen Plays: One*. London: Methuen.
- Ibsen, Henrik. 1995. *Ibsen Plays: Two*. London: Methuen.
- Innes, Christopher. 1999. Modernism in Drama. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Levenson, Michael, 130-56. Cambridge: CUP.
- Jacobs, Jason. 2000. *The Intimate Screen*. Oxford: Oxford, 2000.
- Kennedy Martin, Troy. 1964. Nats Go Home. *Encore* 48: 21-33.
- Marker, Frederick J. and Marker, Lise-Lone. 1989. *Ibsen's lively art: A*

*performance study of the major plays*. Cambridge: CUP.

Moi, Toril. 2006. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Törnqvist, Egil. 1999. *Ibsen, Strindberg and the Intimate Theatre: Studies in TV Presentation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Wheatley, Helen. 2005. Rooms within Rooms: *Upstairs Downstairs* & the Studio Costume Drama of the 1970s. In *ITV Cultures*, eds. Johnson, Catherine, and Turnock, Rob, 143-58. Maidenhead: Open University.

Williams, Raymond. 1961. *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Williams, Raymond. 1969. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1971. Remembering the Thirties. *Listener*, April 08: 460.

Worsley, T. C. 1970. *Television the Ephemeral Art*. London: Alan Ross.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> “Despite what everyone may say, naturalism is not a visual form” is an unpersuasive way to frame an argument. Plays that depict work taking place on stage, from Gerhardt Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* (1892) to David Storey’s *The Contractor* (1969), form examples of naturalist plays that are visually led by a process occurring on stage in real time, where the verbally-realised dialogue is secondary to the visual element of the physical action. Although such actions might have been considered harder to realise convincingly on television than conversations between characters, Caughie’s (2000) reading of the wordless and panoramic opening scene of a factory yard, realised theatrically within the television studio, in a 1960 ITV/ ABC *Armchair Theatre* play (*Lena, Oh my Lena*) suggests how the narrative of ‘nat’ drama might be visually-led.

<sup>ii</sup> This argument is more persuasive when applied to television technology of 1964 (with fewer opportunities for postproduction and viewed on small screens with no opportunity for audiences to record and re-watch programmes) than to that of the present day. See Jacobs’ conception of early television as a medium of ‘relay’ (2000).

<sup>iii</sup> This point of view can be contested by Wheatley’s (2005) reading of *Upstairs, Downstairs* (ITV/ LWT 1971-75) as a drama that creates a visual and tactile understanding for the viewer through the highly selective presentation of objects.

---

<sup>iv</sup> Moi (2006, 17-9) traces a history of academic mistrust of Ibsenite naturalism, with reference to Erich Auerbach (1953), Eric Bentley (1953) and Raymond Williams (1961, 1969).

<sup>v</sup> Television drama, especially before the availability of the home video, was also mediated through an institution, through being broadcast at a pre-set time to a communal audience, albeit one isolated into small groups of individual viewers.

<sup>vi</sup> Details of these productions and their archival status can be found on the University of Westminster Screen Plays Database (<http://bufvc.ac.uk/screenplays/>)

<sup>vii</sup> This version was the third (and, to date, final) production of *The Lady from the Sea* made for British television. BBC Television had broadcast previous versions in 1953 (d. Harold Clayton) and 1958 (d. Michael Elliott). The 1953 production survives, one of the earliest television dramas to do so.

<sup>viii</sup> Basil Coleman (1916-2013) started his career in opera, directing four Benjamin Britten premiers between 1949-54. His initial BBC television productions were operas (including *Billy Budd*, 1966). Later productions included *As You Like It* (BBC 1978) and a ten-part serialisation of *Anna Karenina* (BBC 1977).

---

<sup>ix</sup> This perceived artifice is a recurring complaint amongst the audiences of adaptations of naturalist plays made under studio conditions during this period. For example, Viewing Reports for Ibsen's *When we Dead Awaken* (BBC2, 1970) (BBC WAC VR/70/81) and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (BBC1, *Play of the Month*, 1970) (BBC WAC VR/70/35).

<sup>x</sup> At the NFT screening of *The Lady from the Sea* on 14 October 2006, I briefly talked to Basil Coleman, who told me that Cedric Messina commissioned the production as a star vehicle for Eileen Atkins.

<sup>xi</sup> Showing the scene through a windowpane (therefore implicating the viewer in the action of the scene rather than merely presenting it to them) complicates Caughie's (2000) characterization of the boxed, immobile, camera style.

<sup>xii</sup> The Reaction Index for *The Lady from the Sea* was a low 46 (WAC VR/74/161).

<sup>xiii</sup> In contrast, the audience research report for *The Wild Duck* quoted viewers who had found a clear meaning in the play that they could apply to their own lives: "although they did not usually care for Ibsen, they had found this play unexpectedly arresting as a warning to people who are inclined to interfere in the lives and affairs of others, especially, as one viewer pointed out 'by way of easing their own conscience'" (BBC WAC VR/71/68).

---

<sup>xiv</sup> In Bridges' production, the opening and closing credits both play over shots of the actual duck in the attic.

<sup>xv</sup> *Hedda Gabler* has been produced for British Television on a further five occasions; 1957 (ITV/ ATV, d. Lionel Harris) with Pamela Browne as Hedda; Alex Segal's 1962 BBC production with Ingrid Bergman; a Welsh language version (BBC Wales 1968); David Cunliffe's 1981 version starring Diana Rigg (ITV/ Yorkshire Television); and Deborah Warner's 1993 BBC production (with Fiona Shaw).

<sup>xvi</sup> Waris Hussein's (b. 1938) television productions include the first *Doctor Who* serial, 'An Unearthly Child' (BBC 1963), *A Passage to India* (BBC 1965), *Shoulder to Shoulder* (BBC 1974) and *Edward and Mrs. Simpson* (ITV/ Thames 1978). He has also directed seven feature films.

<sup>xvii</sup> An action mockingly mimicked by Hedda to Tesman's face in her final scene with Tesman in this production.

<sup>xviii</sup> Similar brief scenes of Hedda alone occur in the spaces between stage acts in this production. The effect of these sequences is slightly different to the initial one, as they are also included to give a sense of the time that elapses between acts, and emulate the moments of reflection that a theatrical audience would experience during blackouts and/or intervals. At certain points, these interludes show Hedda at the piano. In Ibsen's text Hedda only plays the piano immediately prior to her suicide ("Suddenly she begins to

---

play a frenzied dance medley”, 1995, 333). This moment of action and its curtailment in Act Four is perhaps given more force in the television adaptation than it is on the stage, because the viewer has been shown the sense of release that Hedda can gain through playing the piano.

<sup>xix</sup> Alan Bridges’ (1927-2013) also directed Ibsen’s *Ghosts* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1967. His television productions included four plays by David Mercer and three by Dennis Potter. He also directed nine feature films, including *The Shooting Party* (1985).

<sup>xx</sup> For example, recording of the *Play of the Month* productions of *Ghosts* (1968) (BBC WAC T5/1,434/1) and *An Ideal Husband* (1969) (BBC WAC T5/853/1) followed this three-day pattern.

<sup>xxi</sup> The recording notes for *An Ideal Husband* (1969) (BBC WAC T5/853/1) show a typical example of reasons for interrupted recording; every restart necessitated by technical errors and fluffs, apart from one request from a star performer.

<sup>xxii</sup> Although the actual dialogue in this scene is not so harmonious (1994, 139-44), concerning Hjalmar’s unreliability as a father and breadwinner.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Aside from a violin motif used over the opening and closing credits and to indicate the end and beginning of scenes, the only music used in Bridges’ production occurs during the two occasions specified by Ibsen; an offstage

---

piano playing incongruous party music during Hakon and Gregers' altercation, and when Hjalmar plays the flute.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The four criteria specifically chosen for evaluation were different for *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler*. Both sets of viewers were asked to rate their productions level of entertainment, but the *Hedda* audience were invited to analyse the play on the basis of how easy it was to understand, its plot and whether it was out-of-the-ordinary. These questions indicate a greater concern with popular dramatic television values, attracting an audience and keeping it watching, than those asked of *Wild Duck* viewers, perhaps reflecting *Hedda*'s greater fame as a play, and interest in its Friday night scheduling, unusual for a *Play of the Month* production.

<sup>xxv</sup> This perceived fault of Bridges' production, that his realisation of Act One made the production start slowly and incoherently, continues to affect some viewers, generations after the original circumstances of broadcast. At the National Film Theatre presentation of 7 October 2006, audience members complained of a play with an unsatisfactorily slow and gloomily-lit start, which then went on to improve.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Bridges' variations of pace appear to be supported by Ibsen's text. The arrival of guests for lunch at the end of Act Three, or the confusion that results from Hedvig's death at the play's climax, imply a busy and chaotic performance style at these moments.



---

<sup>xxvii</sup> See *Moi* (2006, 251-2)