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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*The principal purpose of **p.o.v.** is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.*

*Every March issue of **p.o.v.** is devoted to the short fiction film.*

p.o.u.

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Introduction

About a year ago, Claus Christensen suggested that an issue of this journal be devoted to the Dogma phenomenon, and proposed the names of several highly qualified people who might contribute articles on the subject. His advice and assistance were invaluable in the planning of this issue. Thanks are also due to all of the contributors for their thoughtful work; to Jens Albinus and Louise Hassing for the interview they kindly granted to Jan Oxholm Jensen and Jakob Isak Nielsen; to Ditte Hegelund at Zentropa for permission to reprint the Dogma 95 manifesto and Vow of Chastity; and to Mette Hjort for her invaluable help with proof-reading this issue.

In keeping with the overall policy of **p.o.u.**, an attempt has been made here to illuminate the subject at hand from a number of points of view, and through the eyes of critics as well as admirers. Most of the attention in these pages has been focused on the first two Dogma films: Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen/The Celebration* (Dogma 1, 1998) and Lars von Trier's *Idioterne/The Idiots* (Dogma 2, 1998). Since little or no attention is devoted here to Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's *Mifunes sidste sang/Mifune's Last Stand* (Dogma 3, 1999) and Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive* (Dogma 4, 2000), not to mention the growing number of Dogma films produced outside of Denmark, we have made a point of entitling this issue: *Aspects of Dogma* in order to emphasize the fact that our treatment of the subject is far from exhaustive.

Few events in the history of cinema have polarized film professionals to the same degree that Dogma has, with the result that colleagues who have the highest respect for one another's discerning judgment, can find themselves on opposite sides of the fence with respect to the Dogma principles and – though perhaps to a lesser degree – to the Dogma films. It is difficult to understand how equally competent and perceptive researchers, reviewers and filmmakers can have such diametrically opposed views on the same phenomenon. This in itself would be a worthy subject for study by sociologists of culture, though they too might well be divided in their outlook.

In any event, the articles in this issue will both confirm and challenge the reader's views, whatever the reader's standpoint may be. And though the reader may still see Dogma in essentially the same light after reading this new material, he or she may have a slightly clearer sense as to how that case might be argued and defended, as well as a better understanding of the opposing points of view.

Richard Raskin
Editor

DOGMA 95

DOGMA 95 is a collection of film directors founded in Copenhagen in spring 1995. DOGMA 95 has the expressed goal of countering "certain tendencies" in the cinema today.

DOGMA 95 is a rescue action!

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck.

Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby... false!

To DOGMA 95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the medium becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase "avant-garde" has military connotations. Discipline is the answer... we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition!

DOGMA 95 counters the individual film by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticized to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The "supreme" task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the "100 years" have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated?... By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not "high art". As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.

The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.

To DOGMA 95 the movie is not illusion!

Today a technological storm is raging of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

DOGMA 95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

THE VOW OF CHASTITY:

I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGMA 95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work", as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

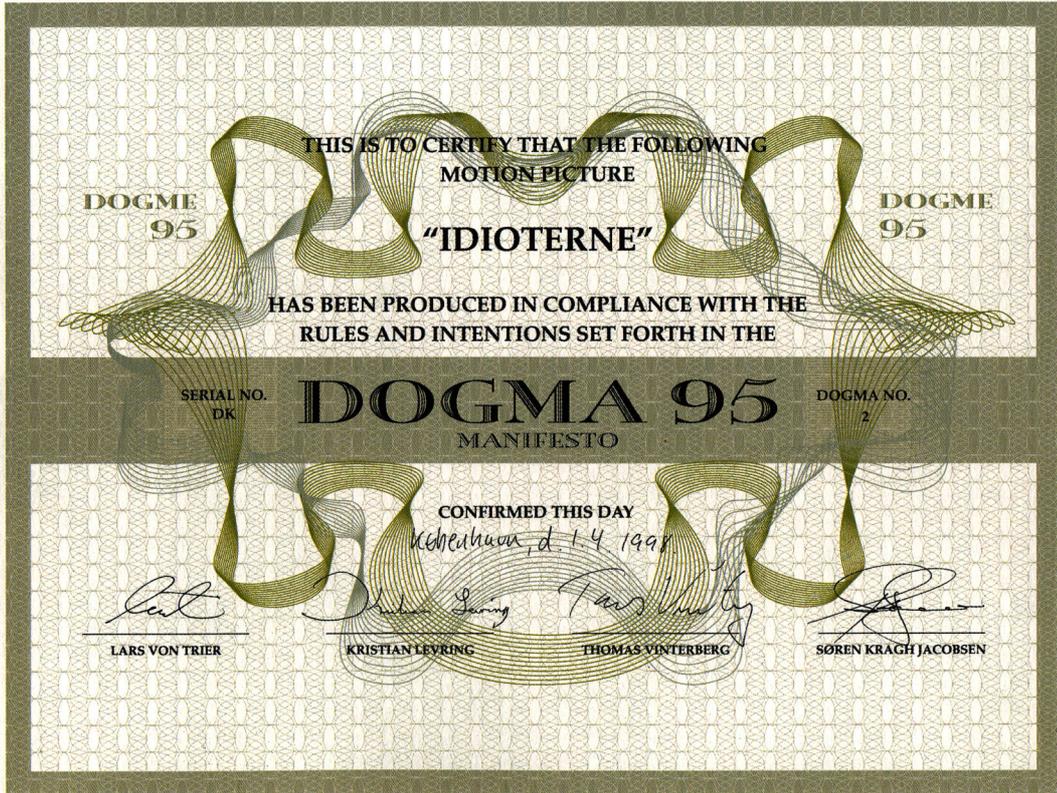
Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.

Copenhagen, Monday 13 March 1995

On behalf of DOGMA 95

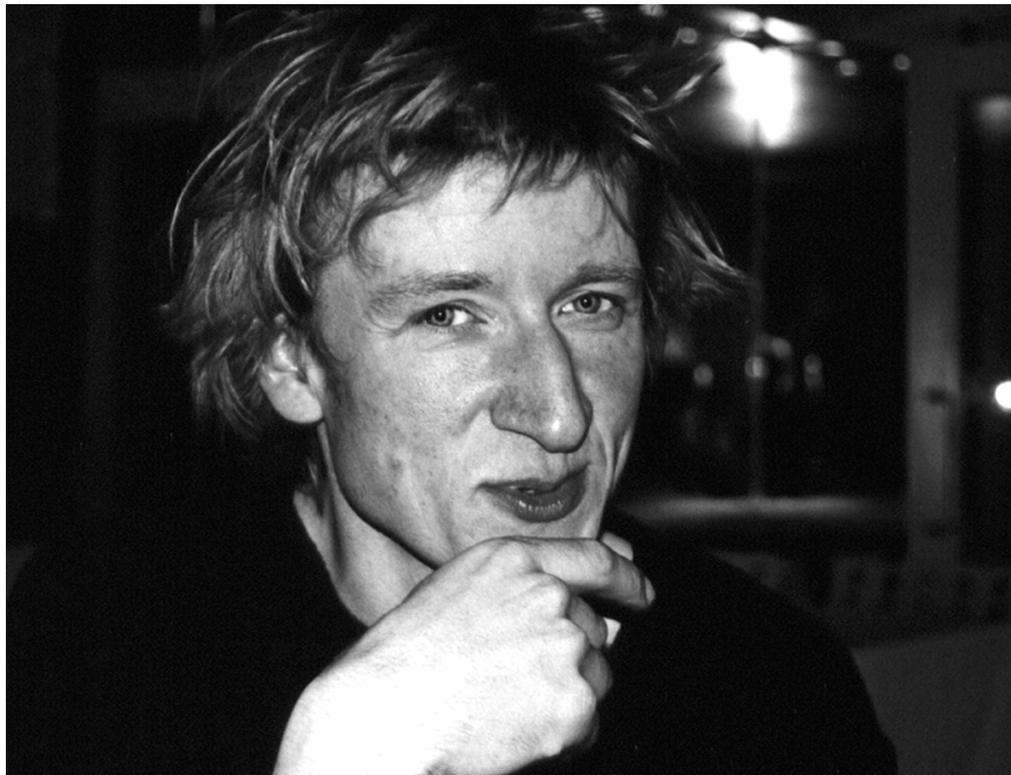
Lars von Trier

Thomas Vinterberg



On *THE IDIOTS*





The ultimate Dogma film. An interview with Jens Albinus and Louise Hassing on Dogma 2 – *The Idiots*

Jan Oxholm and Jakob Isak Nielsen

Louise Hassing (Susanne), born 1967.

1992-1997 *Kærlighedens smerte* (Nils Malmros)

1992-1998 Statens Teaterskole

1998 *Idioterne* (Lars von Trier)

11. Klinkevals (Hans Kristensen)

12. Helenes himmelfærd (Theater)

2000 *Afsporet* (Jannik Johansen)

Jens Albinus (Stoffer), born 1965.

1985-1989 Skuespillerskolen, Aarhus Theater.

1989-1994 Theater acting, Aarhus Theater.

1996 *Anton* (Aage Rais)

1996 *Portland* (Niels Arden Oplev)

1996 *Bryggeren* (TV Series)

1998 *Idioterne* (Lars von Trier)

1998 *Den blå munk* (Christian Braad Thomsen)

2000 *Fruen på Hamre* (Katrine Wiedemann)

2000 *Helenes himmelfærd* (Play directed by Jens Albinus)

How did Lars von Trier first present the project to you?

LH: He invited us to his home and told us how the idea came to him, that it was an old idea he had been carrying around for a long time, the idea of being an idiot, that is. Then we simply sat around and talked and then he went to Sweden and wrote the script in five days.

JA: The fact is that the Dogma rules and this particular work of fiction are closely intertwined so therefore it's true what Louise says, that he had been storing the idea for an idiot film for quite some time. Lars has always made rules for his films. These have always been rules for himself, so this time he thought it could be fun to write down these rules and ask others to make films under the same conditions.

The Idiots was a piece of fiction that fit the rules but it's equally true to say that the Dogma-rules fit this piece of fiction; fiction and rules come into existence simultaneously in all Lars' films. Form and content are two sides of the same coin.

However, when we received a piece of paper containing the Dogma rules, they didn't mean much to me. We had read about Dogma 95 in the newspapers and I remember thinking to myself: "What the hell is this?!" Even the casting was very much in the spirit of the whole project – 22 people taking part in one huge collective improvisation. It was a complete mess!

LH: It was really awful!

JA: And I was completely sure I'd never hear anything from them again.

Were you cast specifically for the parts you have in the film?

LH and JA: You bet we were!

JA: When the project was presented to *me*, the last scene in the home of Karen's family was essential to the film. It was as though everything else was to build up to that particular scene. This scene was written in advance, prior to the casting, and it looks very much like the scene in the film. I had the impression that this was the scene Lars was very sure of. He knew exactly that he wanted it to be done in this particular way. The shooting of that scene seemed longer than all the others.

It's quite paradoxical that the last scene was predetermined when you hold it up against all the improvisation that took place.

JA: Yes, but to me the film falls in two parts. There's that first part of the film which I know was written on the basis of many discussions. I went up to Lars and we climbed trees, we talked about tumors etc. and then we wrote this and that into the script. Therefore, the execution of that part of the film was very different from the execution of the final scene. Well, I didn't take part in the final scene but isn't it true that Lars was very firm and precise about what he wanted and didn't stop until he had captured that?

LH: Yes, absolutely. It was also my understanding that he knew exactly what he was looking for.

JA: And I think it's wise not to lose grip of the key points of a story, and it's also wise to balance tight and loose direction.

Louise, when shooting the last scene did you notice a change in genre? The first part of the film may be said to be dominated by comical elements whereas the last shifts to tragedy.

LH: Well yes, maybe not a change of genre but there definitely was a shift. For one thing there was no improvisation. Furthermore, three days had been set aside just for the shooting of that last scene. Altogether, there was a more serious atmosphere because it was the climax of the film – the essence of what the film was about. So it was very, very important that every detail was just right.

The film was also shot chronologically.

JA: Now *that* I felt was a great help to the actors. I mean, I almost couldn't imagine it being done in any other way, the whole process would've been...

LH:...also because everything falls apart *gradually* in the group. I can't imagine the film being shot in a non-chronological way.

Could you give a brief description of a typical shoot?

JA: Typical would be "today we shoot scene 9". We meet, make some agreements and do some tests... very conventional... and then we do scene 9 almost the way it is written in the script. We would often modify the lines. Then we would shoot the scene again, less restricted, and then again even less restricted than before and so on until we were way-out there... and the material that is in the film is very often those first takes that were close to the script.

What if you had spent every night in the house during production? You were only there a single night.

LH: We would've been fucked up...

JA: The balance would have tipped, for it's very much a question of energy and if you don't have some place where you can go to build up strength and then come back... then you don't have anything left to insert into that machine.

LH: I would've gone completely insane if I had to live out there, that is, not coming home to recharge the batteries and be myself again.

What have you actually done in terms of making your characters credible?

LH: First off, we had fourteen days to prepare. Whereas the others had to find out how to act spastically in a plausible way, I had to figure out how I could fulfill the caretaker function I had. I visited an asylum for mentally handicapped to do a little research and then I think Lars, especially in the beginning, put great emphasis on the fact that we shouldn't produce anything for the camera but just *be*.

So your acting wasn't addressed to the camera?

JA: No! And I think that is of crucial importance in terms of acting and Dogma films. As to camera work it's a rule-of-thumb that it's no good to deliver something to the camera. It's a general rule behind many American acting methods that you should *be* and not act. For example, if you say something that hurts me, I know I shouldn't produce tears for the sake of the camera. But what happens when you have those

two-minute takes, and especially if you film out of chronological order, is that you need to have an incredible amount of control. It still becomes a question of producing and delivering something specific for the next take. Of course, you can be damn good at that but I think that even with the great actors/actresses, Meryl Streep for example, I often think to myself: "Nah, now she's producing something for the sake of the lens."

There's a hell of a difference between that and a take that lasts, say, 50 minutes when you work with the Dogma-rule that states that the action doesn't take place where the camera is but that the camera is where the action is, and that's more than a cliché. For example, one of the first shoots in the restaurant where Louise (Hassing), and Troels (Troels Lyby plays the character Henrik) and I were to sit at one table and Karen (played by Bodil Jørgensen) and the waiter were situated at the other end of the room. There was to be dialogue both places and then a camera would rush back and forth from our landscape down to the other landscape and back again. In those moments where the camera was gone we *did* act on as we had been told but it was more a question of killing time, we saved some of the quality moments for the camera but Lars told us: "No, no, you just go on", and we said: "But isn't it important that you get that...?", "No, no, don't even think about it, forget it."

It's also got something to do with the function of the camera in Dogma. The camera is much more than a window or a gateway for the audience; in Dogma the camera is a participant that has a

temperament and an emotional life of its own. Sometimes the camera is a little inquisitive; sometimes it is a little inattentive. Sometimes the camera is there, sometimes it isn't but it is very much about creating landscapes that the camera can investigate.

How would you characterize the type of acting you do in the film?

LH: I think it's close to method acting. Sometimes I had some discussions with Lars about what was character and what was *me* and it is quite clear that he wanted the two to mesh. Of course, that's why the film seems so authentic.

Bodil and I had some very long improvisations where he looked for something very specific. There's that windowsill scene that is short, but is very important for the relationship between Susanne and Karen. There I think he used some methods that almost resembled therapy. I had prepared something about Susanne – what could her background be? Then Lars said: "Oh, just try and forget that and tell me something about yourself." You can say that it works, I guess. I mean, the result is good, but I wouldn't like to work like that forever. It's hard and I think to be an actress is just as much about creating a character who is not *you*....

... but Lars von Trier mixed character and the person behind; the boundaries blurred?

LH: Yes, and that was also his intention.

JA: I'm a workaholic and had done a gigantic amount of preparation. I don't know how much I've thought about who this person was... Knut Hamsun, Nietzsche, suburban puberty, you name it, all kinds of

things. To a great extent Lars demolished that. It was very strenuous because it felt like “hello, what have I contributed?” and when the shooting was over I had a very clear sense of not having done diddly. I’ve seen the film three times now and I think it’s a great film, but the first two times I saw it I was not at all satisfied with my own work. Then I made the interesting discovery that some of that demolishing had actually been a gift and I must say that I’ve realized something that is profound and fundamental: maybe it’s about finding something and then having it taken from you even though that is very painful.



But there is something about the whole project that relates to control and non-control because that is closely connected to Lars’ personality. He is a control freak who constantly tries to sabotage his own control measures, and really, Dogma is ridiculous, it’s fun, it’s comical, it’s a parody. It’s absolutely grotesque to create Dogma 95 which is this law that cannot be broken, and then having it consist of rules that are all meant to sabotage traditional filmmaking. Dogma is a paradox, the whole project of *The Idiots* is paradoxical but there’s yet another paradox in wanting to control your own loss of control. Lars has always compared Dogma to being in kindergarten and about to do

something with paper but then placing the pair of scissors on top of the cupboard. Thus you have to find other options and in connection with this I must say that I've never been a part of something where the carpet was pulled from under everyone's feet to such an extent, so that we worked in the ruins of old constructions. But I also think that the research and the work Louise did on Susanne, constructions that were destroyed, somewhere that is discernible in the film.

A director like Hitchcock or Fritz Lang might have drawn lines with chalk on the floor to direct the actors on where to be at a particular point in time. There was no strictly defined space of acting in The Idiots. How did you experience this "loss"?

LH: Very positively! It gave me a lot of freedom, also because the style of acting in my first film, *Kærlighedens smerte* (1992), was the exact opposite. With Niels (Malmros) everything had to be very precise, including the pronunciation of the lines. So to me this freedom made a strong impression. It was also a great challenge as an actress because suddenly there was this space that at first was a little scary because "I have to fill this space"....

JA: ...as opposed to working in the theater for instance, where you have some architecture, in the broad sense of the word. You have something that you can prepare and that you can prepare for. You walk into that particular space and go right to the limit, but you definitely have a demarcated architecture within which you let yourself go.

Did the actors select the locations for the shoots?

LH: Hmm, both yes and no.

So the rule about the camera seeking out the action isn't a hundred per cent viable?

LH: Nah, yeah, I think it was.

JA: Well yes, you could say that a lot of situations took form as a collective thing. For example, when Josefine (Louise Mieritz) is picked up by her father (Anders Hove), where we're all sitting at that stone table, I think that was very much a spur of the moment thing.

LH: It was?

JA: Yes, and in my mind we did some of the best Dogma acting that particular morning. Often during production we would have one or two outsiders interact with the group and in this particular case it was Anders Hove. We just sat and waited and it was mere chance that we ended up at that table. And then Lars...I didn't even know he had a camera, then Lars said: "Okay, tests are for wimps, let's shoot!" and then we did a first take that was exceptionally good. It took us a long time to get to that stage, a long time.

You (JA) once said that the scene where you run around naked shouting "Søllerød fascists" was improvised.

JA: Well, we knew that the scene was going to be like that. After all, it was in the script.

LH: I knew that you were going to be naked.

JA: But the scene in the attic afterwards, that it was going to be such an emotional scene for everyone present, that completely took me by surprise, it took us all by surprise, including Lars. He hadn't meant it to be this way. It just came to be.

Lars von Trier was behind the camera and perhaps there was a man in charge of sound...I mean, there wasn't a major set. Was that a relief to you?

LH: Yes!

JA: Both yes and no, I would say, because everyone enjoys having all those people around – four women who powder you all over. The funny thing is that to be an actor is so strange, it must be one of the strangest things in the world because, basically it is about administration of energy. On a normal set you can sort of lean back and there are thirteen people who, aside from carrying out a specific function, also bring some energy to the set. That's why it's so hysterical on the big budget foreign films where they need a trailer, a trailer for the dog, and a psychologist and a masseuse and all those things. When carried out successfully, you feel like you're carried along on a wave of energy. You have thirteen people who are affirming your presence on the set, you're given time and there's space around you and I think that this is the kind of energy that many good actors use to put themselves into a position where they can deliver. In *The Idiots* we were totally stripped of that!



You weren't considered special. You were just part of the group?

JA: You bet we weren't special.

LH: Hell no! But as opposed to Jens I don't like having all those people around me. The very best experience I had which I can take with me from *The Idiots* is the feeling of sometimes not having that third eye observing me.

At one point in the movie Stoffer says: "This is too bloody humiliating." Do you feel that you've exposed yourselves..., humiliated yourselves?

LH: To some extent you always do, that's the way I feel about it. Otherwise, you're a bad actress.

JA: You have to put yourself on the line. The question is where that line between control and non-control is drawn. That's the parameter you have to work with.

LH: I definitely had the impression that...I think Lars sometimes went too far but then again I wouldn't do without it. When I first became involved with this project, I felt that it was like getting on some train having no idea where it was going. I just had to go along. In my mind it stands out as something that constantly was very transgressive. I always felt I had to cross that line and I'm a person who likes that, but at the same time finds it terribly embarrassing.

JA: Does it extend to your work as an actress in general?

LH: Well yes, that *is* true, but with *The Idiots* it went one step further.

Upon seeing the film, are there any sequences in the film where you say to yourself: "Wait a minute, I didn't even act there" or "I had no idea someone was filming that"?

LH: Yes, there are numerous instances where I thought to myself: "Why the hell did he use that shot?", because I distinctly remember doing some takes where I had a stronger grip on something, but I think that exactly those takes that were used had captured some moments where...

... the boundary line between the character and private person is blurred?

LH: Yes, it's some of those instances where I remember feeling terribly embarrassed as *me*.

JA: I do have some experience directing as well as acting, not as a movie director but as a stage director and I think it's also a question about actors being satisfied with their performance when they do something that fits their idea of what it's like to be a good actor. They see themselves acting successfully even though their criteria of successful acting don't necessarily match the criteria I have as a director. We've had some examples of that during the rehearsals for *Helenes himmelfærd* (2000). Sometimes Louise simply brought tears to my eyes and Louise just went "well, I didn't do anything!"

LH: It's gradually becoming clear to me that being an actress is about...*not* acting but *being*, but what's really becoming clear to me is that *just being* is damn hard work.

JA: Even though Dogma acting might look like *method acting*, it is something else. You cannot prepare yourself for the part; the fiction can only take shape here and now. For instance I had to be the leader

of the group; it was tough and must be a real test for anyone who has to go through it. I have to say that I failed all the way through until it suddenly emerged. In that way, Dogma is similar to the theater – with those long *takes*. It's all in your head, like a handball player you are nearly automatically programmed. The player does not think rationally about when to turn to the right. Then you might ask yourself, do they really play handball? Yes, they damn well do, because it's in their blood!

On the other hand, if they forget the fundamental programming, it is not acting. Because when you do 50 minutes of improvisation in a group of 11 actors, you must be conscious of the rules present. And then you have to take the rules by the hand and work them into your bones, as my old headmaster would say. In doing so you are programmed and instinctively turn right or left...

Do you think that Trier wanted you to lose the fundamental programming, as you call it, or was it his intention to let it be so instinctive not to be noticed?

JA: I've tried to discuss this with Lars, but he really doesn't think in those terms because Lars follows his instincts when it comes to actors. As a professional this is something I have devoted my time to for many years and thereby I've obtained a certain language. This is not the case with Lars. He is extremely conscious, professional and always goal-directed...but not with actors.

LH: He's got this inner instinct, he's able to see and feel *it* coming...

JA: There is something mystical about it...

It is said that The Kingdom (1994) was a turning point for Trier's relation to actors.

JA: His phobias concern him a lot. Lars has intensely complicated phobias and his way of dealing with them is to confront the phobias. That means that you have to do all the things you fear the most. And he was so damned scared of the actors that he decided to go all the way. And that's the ironic thing about life: if you really dare to step over the line into those unknown fields you'll find a solution. It is absolutely incredible that Lars is so great at shaping characters out of the actors. It's not that he's been studying it at the university for 13 years...

It might not even be a help...?

JA: To some, perhaps, but not to Lars!

How did the idea of the visiting mongoloids come up? Was it something you both knew beforehand, or...?

JA: It was in the script...

So the way you react is not authentic or improvised but instructed by...

LH: No, I don't think so. We all knew that we would work on this particular scene that day. Lars didn't take us for a ride and surprise us with a group of mongoloids suddenly entering the film; we knew the scene.

However, we didn't have the usual screen tests, you know, they just came in and said "hello" to the camera...and it all went wrong...



JA: And you know, what was really funny, was that the second time they entered the scene for take two they yelled: "Here we are! Once again!" It was hilarious.

You could have used that cut in the final film, or would it have been inconsistent with the rest of the film ?

JA: That's a question of choice. I think the energy of the film walks on a razor's edge between improvisation and direction. Does the film look like the one Lars imagined? Or doesn't it? Well, if there's an unambiguous answer to that, there wouldn't be a film. This is exactly what's interesting... it is about freedom: freedom on different levels, in the fiction and also in the way the film was made.

That is to say that for the actors as well as the project The Idiots it has been a matter of placing yourself on the razor's edge between control and non-control?

LH: Yes, yes, yes!

JA: Yes, I think that's precisely the point... If you take a look at another Danish film that operates with the concept of control and non-control, it's Jonas Elmer's *Let's Get Lost* (1997). This film only works because of

the tension between the general leaning back and then the frustrations of a main character like Sidse Babett Knudsen.

In connection with the technique of the film, Trier once said that the minimal technique in Dogma with no lighting, for instance, must be like a dream for actors...

JA: Lars loves to put things like that, but it doesn't work this way. Yes! There is more freedom, and no! There's less.

Another paradox?

JA: Yes, that's the way I experienced it.

LH: I just think that it was really, really great that the essential core of the film was relations between the actors...the spotlight is on the story as a result of the austere style. I really like that...

JA: As an actor you don't just sit there and wait for hours...

The interview sequences in the film have started many discussions because of the documentary touch. How were they presented to you?

LH: Well, to be honest, I never really understood the purpose of that interview. Maybe that's just the point. Still a lot of people have asked me if it's *me* as an actor or if it's me as the character Susanne, who is interviewed three weeks after the shooting. As far as I'm concerned, it *is* definitely as Susanne because I really wanted to keep things separate. But it wasn't prepared at all, it really *was* three weeks after the last shoot. In order to get the documentary touch the actors had to feel that it was three weeks later. However, Lars did an extra interview with me, so the interview you see in the film actually took place eight

months later. So he must have sought out for something special after all.

He called me and said that something was missing from Susanne, and I had to do it again. But the first time, I remember that I wasn't sure what he really wanted from me. It wasn't easy for me to answer his questions. Perhaps I wasn't able to reach my character at the time; I wasn't part of the group anymore, and I didn't really think it worked.

Did you feel that Lars addressed himself to the character Susanne or were the questions directly addressed to you?

LH: Without doubt he asked *me*... and that's why I got confused...

So what you're saying is that there was sort of a fight between the two of you...he asked Louise Hassing and you answered as Susanne?

LH: Yes.

Was it never considered that your character was to play an idiot once in a while?

LH: Of course, but I just play an idiot in my own way. I ask myself the question: "Who the hell is Susanne and what are her motives?" In that way I also felt like an idiot...not as a mentally retarded person but more as the idiot who accepts the crazy project led by Stoffer. But I was not supposed to freak out. My function in the group was to be the center or the connecting link of the group... to keep everything together.

What does Stoffer actually represent?

JA: He's a self-contradiction.

Back to the paradox?

JA: I love it, you know, it's really a great, enormously exciting part I play...the way I constantly seem to kick the door in and make cracks in the wall, whereas Susanne always puts the fragments together. My part also has a double function, partly in a fiction about a group of people mocking society with Stoffer, as leader and partly about a group of people who gather together in a villa and make a film. It's Lars who leads it...he is hidden in this film...

The alter ego of Lars?

JA: Well, you could say that his *ego* is seen in different characters, including Susanne and Karen...But Stoffer is more of an agent who can play out his games.

So you always had to be Trier's agent, not only in the fiction but also outside of it?

JA: All the time, yes. Stoffer makes things happen around him, but at the same time his character is self-destructive. As an example there is a character named Stavrogin in the novel *The Possessed* (Bésy, 1871-72) by Dostoevsky who sort of reminds me of him.

Did Trier, to a greater extent than you, define the character Stoffer?

JA: No, I would very much like to take the credit for this myself; I could be dead wrong because Lars might have thought it all out. Obviously, Lars burns his love for Karen in this film. And to get that tension it is necessary to find characters who link the group together but also to find ones who are unreasonable. Stoffer is constantly saying absurd and irrational things. I tried to create this psychopathic character who was hilarious, but that wasn't really Lars.

It was way over the line?

JA: Yes, and I actually think he's right...because we have *seen* that film before.

You talked a lot about the experiences you've had in a film like The Idiots?

LH: Yes, it's in my blood now, but I don't consciously draw on those experiences. *The Idiots* was also one of my first jobs after acting school. The day after leaving school I had my first shoot for this film, so you might say that I was extremely lucky. But I can't put a finger on my performance in the film and say that right there I took in a particular technique, because *The Idiots* was more about having faith in myself as an actress. Sometimes Lars just said: "Go over there and act and do something..." You know like filling out the space for the time being.

A critic once said that the real strength of The Idiots is the acting...

JA: This is rarely true, and definitely not in a film like *The Idiots*, where everything is interconnected, especially because this method or style of working was a constant inspiration to the film's content and vice versa. Moreover, it had to be like in front of a mirror, which again is in front of another mirror etc...Therefore, it's impossible to say: "Well, that particular mirror is great, whereas the other one over there doesn't fit in."

The different elements in the film depend on each other, and the script really kicks ass; but there is no doubt about the fact that the other Dogma scripts are more developed. Besides, they talk about doing *The Celebration* (1998) at the theater, and that's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard...

You fear the worst?

JA: Yes, it's just the typical way of commercializing everything, you know, now that we have made something that is great, well, let's do it again!

LH: Imagine if they put *The Idiots* on the stage...

JA: Yes, and fortunately that's impossible; nobody could do it, and I'm glad they can't.

There is a cinematic rule called Love cutting which means that you cut a film according to the scenes with the most successful acting. Do you see this rule practiced in The Idiots?

LH: No, on the contrary! It's *Hate cutting!*

JA: Or *Awkwardness cutting*, for sure! I think we agree on that, because it's the question of forming a whole, of telling the story by using all the parameters. Sometimes there's the use of a camera out of focus as a narrative device, and at other times it's actors being completely lost that's used in a narrative context. I remember this messy, nervous scene, that was like cut, cut, cut and then WHAM! We get close-ups of Karen who calls home for the first time. It's this kind of solution which makes use of all parameters, making them work together as a whole. And I believe that both the camera man and the sound engineer think: "Why did you choose the scenes where I appear in the picture...?"

Do you think that the Dogma style of acting has had an influence on stage performances and films in general?

JA: Shouldn't we instead call it a minor revolution? There has been a major change in our generation, a softening of ideas. This has resulted

in a breakthrough for a style of acting that is more free. Until a film like *Pelle the Conqueror* (1988) you accepted the kind of high-flown acting that waves a flag. These days we have a new generation of actors in film and at the theater who are more free, and that means a completely different level of tolerance.

Right now there is this interesting generation gap in the Danish Actors' Equity. The more experienced elder actors don't think that we're able to build up whole set pieces, whereas we believe that they can't deliver intense moments of acting. You often see great actors at the age of 60 who really are superb, but the pleasure of their style is felt in the narrative release of the third act after piling up dead meat for hours. You know, one dead moment after the other. Now we wave our flag this way, because we have to build up to the great, literary release everybody is waiting for. The younger generation is more used to playing multiple roles at the same time. That is our reality today. In that respect we don't accept dead moments.

Did this so-called revolution coincide with the Dogma project The Idiots?

JA: Yes, I think that it was part of it.

In a way it's quite difficult then to say if this new generation existed before The Idiots or...?

JA: No, it is not difficult at all, because I think that it came before *The Idiots*. It's not only a generation of actors, because you could also see a breakthrough for scriptwriters at the time. There are some fantastic film-scriptwriters in Denmark today. I don't know when it started. But somewhere there is a paradigmatic shift just after *Pelle the Conqueror*,

just look at the way *Taxa* (TV Series, 1998) is made. There is a clear "before" and "after", an obvious change of scenes and the actors' language. But the acting style in *Dogma* is without doubt part of a major movement. It's not *Dogma 95* that started it all.

LH: I totally agree.

Could you imagine The Idiots turned into a commercial film?

JA: No, no, it wouldn't be possible, because the cinematic rules of *Dogma 95* and the fiction itself were deeply intertwined and took shape simultaneously, and that's another reason why *The Idiots* is the ultimate *Dogma* film.

Spastic Aesthetics – *The Idiots*

Ove Christensen

*Every film is also a documentary about itself
and its creation.*

Wim Wenders

Lars von Trier's film *The Idiots* is in a sense an unbearable film to watch. It distances itself from the viewer. The images are rough and at times directly unpleasant to watch due to its ugliness and apparent carelessness in matters of colors, composition, lighting and content. Sometimes it is even difficult to determine what is being shown on the screen in that too direct lighting from windows disturbs the images. The movements of the hand-held camera make spatial orientation difficult and some of the jump cuts repel the spectator in that they destroy any conventional comprehension of the cinematic space and time. The effect is a distance or disconnection between spectator and the film. The film rejects direct communication. It is reserved, which of course somehow makes it seductive like an unintelligible work of Modernist art. The comparison with abstract art is not at all far fetched. *The Idiots* is in one sense a very abstract and cool film.

Simultaneously and contradictorily, *The Idiots* draws the spectator into the film's universe, making it a very intense (and warm) film to watch. The use of the home video style minimises the distance between the story and the telling of the story in that the position of enunciation becomes, if not equivalent to, then very close to that of the spectator.

The complicity between camera and spectator is caused by the film's style, which mimes that of the spectators' own videotaping of their children and other everyday experiences. This complicity between spectator and camera in *The Idiots* differs from the way identification between camera and spectator was discussed in the 60s and 70s. Baudry, Metz and Mulvey for example operate with a much more abstract psychoanalytical concept of the viewer and of the enunciation. The idea was that the (male) spectator-subject identifies with an omnipresent and omniscient enunciator giving the (male) spectator a pseudo control and thereby confirming the ideology of masculinity as actively mastering 'the other'. *The Idiots*, however, mimes an aesthetic well known from everyday praxis, which makes the complicity much more immediate and intimate. One could say that the complicity in *The Idiots* is with the recording/taping and not with the camera as such.

Far from being a matter of physical and intellectual control the complicity between the filming of the film and the spectator becomes an emotional investment. The emotions at stake are so intense that the spectator is intimately involved. The empathy with the protagonist, Karen, is forced upon the spectator by the character's vulnerability, her naive 'goodness' and not least by the embarrassing sequence with her family at the end of the film.

Contrary to *Breaking the Waves* the emotions laid bare in *The Idiots* are not presented as existing within a melodrama with its clear dramaturgy. It is stated in the Manifesto, *Dogma 95*, that dramaturgy is

one of the techniques that has corrupted filmmaking giving it over to predictability, superficialities of action and the illusions of feelings.

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not 'high art'. As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise. The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.¹

Obviously, however, dramaturgy is unavoidable.² In that it is sequential, film will always imply a dramaturgy. And furthermore, the spectator will make events connect and, hence, create a narrative. Still, it is obvious that *The Idiots* is not a good narrative measured by film school standards since its narrative is unfocussed and at times it is even completely void of any narrative drive.

When it comes to narrative the film disregards the audience. The narrative in *The Idiots* is not easily determined, but with the wisdom of hindsight it becomes evident that we follow two different narrative threads. In the course of the telling we are really not sure what the stories connected with the main characters Stoffer and Karen are about. We are never presented with a clear conflict.

The Idiots appears at first glance to be a very careless film. Sequences are strung together aimlessly without giving the spectator any concept of a project that might be important to the characters. The film refuses

¹ *Dogme 95* (The Dogme Manifesto), www.dogme95.dk

² Cf. the diary von Trier made under the shooting of *The Idiots*. The diary is included in the published manuscript. And in an interview with Peter Øvig Knudsen, von Trier says about the wish to avoid dramaturgy: "It's a contradiction in terms, because no matter what choice

to answer the rather simple question of what the film is all about. We follow a collective of provocateurs of bourgeois behavior. They are playing at being idiots ('spasser')³ as a kind of protest, but why they wish to provoke society – 'the system' – is in no sense clear. It becomes obvious that Stoffer is their leader and we feel his anger. But we do not get any explanation of this anger. The reason for his behavior and how this relates to what his purpose is with the community is beyond comprehension. In the sequence in the forest we get a few vague remarks about the idiot as the man of the future, which indicate a connection with the anti-psychiatric movement of the 70s. The same goes for the philosophy of 'the inner idiot in every man'. But at the same time the collective's project is not stated as political, and it is very doubtful that the members of the collective have a common motive for participating. Nana distances herself from the 'spassing' which she finds ridiculous. Susanne does not want to 'spas' at all, she only wants to take care of the 'spassers' when they go outside their large house.

The most obvious of the narrative strings is related to the project of 'spassing'. The character Stoffer is the leader of the 'spasser' project and he tells Karen that the project is about letting one's inner idiot out. This narrative is relatively difficult to consider as a narrative proper because the exact purpose of the project is never clear to the spectator. It appears that the 'spassers' have different objectives and these

you make, it's dramaturgy." The interview 'The Man Who Would Give Up Control' is published on www.dogme95.dk

³ 'Spasser' is a condescending term referring to spastic or mentally handicapped people. To 'spasse' is to behave or act like a 'spasser'.

objectives are only passed on very reluctantly to the spectator. It becomes clear, however, that the original 'spasser' project is a failure.

The second narrative string is Karen's struggle with the loss of her child and her recovery from grief and perhaps also her emancipation from a suppressive environment. Psychologically she represses her own needs and is subservient. As the film progresses, the spectator realizes that Karen's story is the most intense. It is, however, also very difficult to follow this narrative in that we do not know anything about this narrative until the end. Only at the closing of the film are we told that Karen lost her new-born child and left home the day before the funeral. We understand furthermore that her home conditions were emotionally very repressive. Karen's story has the structure of a joke in that the point at the end endows the rest of it with meaning. Only at the end does it become clear that Karen's vulnerability (also) has an external explanation.

The two narrative threads are only detectable with hindsight, which makes a first time seeing of the film confusing. A narrative normally needs a drive, which this film lacks. But when one has spotted the two threads of narrative it turns out that they mirror each other. In retrospect it might look like this: Karen and the 'spasser' meet accidentally at a restaurant and the intertwining of narratives takes its beginning. Karen tries to phone her husband, Anders, but hangs up on him, while the 'spassers' evaluate the 'day's spassing'. This evaluation is the beginning of the end for the 'spassing project' while Karen has taken the first step towards reconciliation with the fact of the death of

her child and to emancipation from the restraints of her family life. While Stoffer's plot is failing, Karen more and more becomes the true successor of the 'spasser' project as a means to the accomplishment of her own project.

The turning point is the sequence with the real 'spassers' with Down's syndrome. Here, the two narratives cross. The collective's reactions toward the real 'spassers' mark a severe crisis for the project. Meanwhile Karen is getting in touch with her inner self and is beginning to 'spas'. Unlike the pretending to be a 'spasser', it seems that Karen is involuntarily 'spassing', which marks her 'spassing' as more genuine. She is letting her inner idiot out, something the others did not have the ability to do. Whereas Stoffer is going to pieces Karen is becoming aware of what she has to do. After Stoffer's breakdown and the failure of the 'spassing' project, she takes over the task of demonstrating that it is possible to use the inner idiot to change one's character.

This narrative is thus in consonance with the thematic structure of the film. Basically the film is about role playing and being.⁴ What does it mean to be someone and what does it mean to pretend to be someone? Is being a consequence of acting or does acting make a disguise of an individual's character? Is the individual a *persona*, a mask? This concerns the status of fiction in relation to reality. In this respect *The*

⁴ From another point of view Britta Timm Knudsen also read *The Idiots* as a reflection on the relation between being and playing. See her "Billedernes realisme: Jean-Luc Godards *Vivre sa vie* og Lars von Triers *Idioterne*", *Periskop* # 9, 2000, pp. 239-250.

Idiots is about identity and character and thus also about film as medium and as art.

In *The Idiots* we find three different strata of characters in relation to the character's identity with itself.⁵ At the one end we find the people with Down's syndrome. The Downers act as themselves or at least they are placed as Downers being themselves within the film's universe. It is assumed that the Downers are identical with themselves. They do not pretend to be someone else in that they do not possess a facade that hides their real selves. We can note this as: I = 'I', the latter referring to appearances whereas the first refers to the real identity of the person. The idea is that an individual's identity is literally an identity. Identity is understood as the essence of a person. An individual *is* his or her character.

At the other end is the interviewer. This stratum is a little more difficult to determine because it is not clearly situated within the film. Who is actually interviewing the characters and why, and when are the interviews taking place? Are the interviews part of the same narrative as is unfolding during the rest of the film? It is obvious that the interviews are taking place after the events of the 'spasser' period. But we find no temporal indication of the relation between the main events and the interviews. The logical relation of the interviews to the

⁵ In a very interesting essay Birger Langkjær also discusses different strata of characters in *The Idiots*. He is trying to develop a theory about the spectator's reception of characters by distinguishing between 'person', 'actor' and 'character'. Contrary to Langkjær's emphasis on the level of reception, I am looking at character strata thematically. But my own reading is in some respects close to Langkjær's. See Langkjær: "Fiktions og virkelighed i Lars von Triers *Idioterne*", *Kosmorama* # 224, 1999, pp. 107-120.

rest of the film is also strange. In a later stage of life, the characters are interviewed about an earlier stage. The interviews indicate that we are watching a documentary and this seems in accordance with the fact that the character Henrik is taking notes, apparently recording the 'spasser' project. But it is nowhere indicated that the collective is participating in a documentary and likewise a production crew behind the recounting of the events is never made explicit, although we see operating cameramen. Henrik's taking notes is marked as an individual act and not as part of a more detailed recording. However, the interviewer clearly has an insight into what has happened in the spasser collective. It is as if he has seen the same film that the spectator is watching. At least there is no indication of how he relates to the narrative of the film.

Pinpointing the interviewer's role exactly is made even more difficult in that he might be 'playing' different roles simultaneously. First of all he is an interviewer within the film. He is a character asking questions, although in a playful and ironic manner. He is gaining information through his interview. It is strange in relation to the interview genre that we do not see the interviewer but only hear his questions. Normally we would either see the interviewer in cross cutting or questions would be cut out.

As an actor the interviewer is identifiable as the same person as the non-credited director Lars von Trier. The director, who is also the writer of the manuscript, is questioning the characters. This peculiarity is emphasized by the way the interviews are conducted and the way

the interviews work. The interviews are endowed with a high degree of authenticity and appear as unprepared. It becomes plausible that the characters are not reading lines from a manuscript but simply answering questions in relation to a fictitious character. The authenticating effect emphasizes the documentary tone. This is, however, contradicted by the alienation effect caused by the interviewer being the director, which totally breaks the illusion of documentary as well as the illusion of the filmic make-believe. The same contradictory effect arises from the cameramen being visible in the picture. On the one hand it indicates documentary and realism, a recording of something, which exists independently of its filming. On the other hand it has the meta-filmic effect of breaking the film's own illusion.

The interviewing character being Lars von Trier gives the scene an extra dimension. Lars von Trier as an unseen character/ interviewer invites the spectator to think about what he or she knows about von Trier. As John Fiske remarks, knowledge or gossip concerning media personalities as stars will influence the reception.⁶

The interviewer does not possess an identity. He is only a function, a voice that poses questions, but without any being of his own. This is of course contradicted by our knowledge about von Trier. But as a character, the interviewer does not have any character. He is dehumanized as is also shown by the fact that we only hear his voice

⁶ See for example John Fiske, *Television Culture*. Routledge: London 1987, p. 84f. Langkjær also discusses the influences on reception exerted by the spectator's knowledge of the characters as persons and actors.

and see his knees but never see him as a human figure.⁷ The interviewer is the negation of man and of identity.

Between the two strata mentioned there are the main characters possessing different roles at different times. Basically the main characters inhabit three different positions. They are 'spassers' when they are in a 'spassing' mode. They are simply persons or ordinary people when they behave normally. In the interview session they are different people looking back in time. They have changed in the meanwhile and now look at themselves from a distance and from the outside. From any one of these positions, the other possible positions are considered precisely as roles they might be playing, while the one they actually inhabit will be considered as an identity closer to the person's self-identity. In this case the I differs from the 'I', but an identity exists as an opportunity. If it is possible to ascribe a goal to 'spassing': getting closer to the I through the 'I'. As in the instance with the people with Down's syndrome the idea is still essentialistic.

It is possible to distinguish between three different 'spasser' modes, in that the spassing takes place for different reasons and with varying degrees of impact. The ideology of 'spassing' is that it is possible to let one's inner idiot out. This is the genuine 'spassing' where the role-playing becomes indistinguishable from the being. It is this that

⁷ That we do not actually see the interviewer is also a joke about the rule of Dogme 95 that the director must not be credited. It is a joke in two senses. Being off-screen in a cameo role is a comment upon the rule. But secondly it scorns the rule itself by indicating that the director does not relinquish control of his creation, but is in charge. This is obviously the case with Lars von Trier who shot most of the film himself and despite improvisations, the

Karen, as the only one, achieves when she is 'spassing' involuntarily and when she repeats this when she is together with her family. This kind of idiocy is a way of getting rid of one's false self and becoming a different person. It is almost a Nietzschean project of becoming as opposed to being.

But the spassing is also a method to provoke the bourgeoisie. It is a way of displaying the hollowness of conventional behavior. It is an ideological critique of bourgeois society and the oppression of true individuality. Thirdly the 'spassing' is used to prevent reality's intrusion on the 'spasser' project and to maintain the collective's benefits, for example to stay in the house which belongs to Stoffer's uncle despite potential buyers.

The Idiots is a film about acting and role-playing. One of the themes is the relation between playing a role and being a person. In what way can one 'be' without 'playing'? It makes the status of identity as well as the status of fiction its central concern. The film is also about filmmaking. The editing in the film is discontinuous and the images are often blurred and shaky because of the lack of proper lighting and the hand-held camera. The editing draws attention to the film as a film. But it is also part of the documentary style. The stylistic oscillation between documentary (minimized or spontaneous aesthetics) and marked artificiality furthermore makes the film an investigation into the status of film and the grammar of film. In this sense, *The Idiots* is a film about its own making.

film follows the manuscript pretty closely. Having more than 100 hours of film the director gains in the editing the control which he relinquished in the filming.

Idiocy, Foolishness, and Spastic Jesting

Bodil Marie Thomsen

You're a whole lot dumber than you think.

A film by idiots, about idiots, for idiots.

Lars von Trier

In his existential writings on Christianity, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard, masked as Johannes Climacus, discusses among other things “the pathetic.”¹ In conclusion to section two he writes: “We one-sidedly say that a fool always laughs, one-sidedly, because it is true that it is foolishness always to laugh; but it is one-sided to label only the misuse of laughter as foolishness, since foolishness is just as great and just as corruptive when it expresses itself by always being equally earnest-obtuse.” (Hong I, 525). That a religious explanation for the relationship between an esthetic philosophy of life (based on the relation happiness-

¹ Søren Kierkegaard: *Samlede Værker*, 9 & 10, written in 1846. The English translation of Kierkegaard is in general taken from Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments I-II*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992. Concerning the conceptual meaning of pathos in Kierkegaard I have (together with the translator of my text, Stacey Marie Cozart) consulted *Terminologisk Ordbog* in Danish. We suggest besides “suffering,” and “impassioned emotion” also “enthusiastic passion” and “the solemnly stirred or earnestly elevated in esthetics.” Pathos is related to “the existing thinker’s suffering due to his renunciation of immediacy in favor of truth and the idea of finiteness.” On the relationship between pathos and the comic Kierkegaard writes: “The pathos that is not safeguarded by the comic is an illusion; the comic that is not safeguarded by pathos is immaturity” (Hong I, 87). In greater detail he writes, “Existence itself, existing, is a striving and is just as pathos-filled as it is comic: pathos-filled because the striving is infinite, that is, directed toward the infinite, is a process of infinitizing, which is the highest pathos; comic because the striving is a self-contradiction” (Hong I, 92).

unhappiness) and a religious one (based on suffering) leads to praising the fool's laughter² is due to the fact that Climacus is described as a non-Christian humorist, who in the 19th century lacks religious pathos. Climacus dwells on humor when describing the existential conditions of the pathetic in its *difference* from esthetic pathos, since "The esthetic and the ethical have been mixed together in comfortable balderdash." (Hong I, 392). The difference between "the pathetic" and "the esthetic" concerns the subject or "inwardness," as Kierkegaard also calls it.

Ethically the highest pathos is the pathos of interestedness (which is expressed in this way, that I, acting, transform my whole existence in relation to the object of interest); esthetically the highest pathos is the pathos of disinterestedness. If an individual throws himself away in order to grasp something great, he is esthetically inspired; if he gives up everything in order to save himself, he is ethically inspired. (Hong I, 390).

Another possible distinction involves the possible as opposed to the actual: "In relation to possibility, words are the highest pathos; in relation to actuality, actions are the highest pathos" (Hong I, 389-90), which is why falling in love belongs to the field of esthetics and marriage to that of ethics.

With these few definitions it is easy to see that the pathos that flourishes in Lars von Trier's works *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *The*

² Kierkegaard's text relates to a topos that originates from Erasmus of Rotterdam, who published *The Praise of Folly* (dedicated to his friend Thomas More (author of *Utopia*), whose name means fool or idiot in Latin). Erasmus has the female Moria praise the natural and simple rather than the artificial and especially ascetic Christian ideal. Stupidity, joy, and beatitude are in Erasmus' Christian humanism. Prior to Kierkegaard, the many immediately contradictory textual layers coming from Moria are also found as a stylistic mask in, among others, Montaigne and Shakespeare. Cp. Villy Sørensen's introduction to the Danish translation of *The Praise of Folly: Tåbelighedens lovprisning*.

Idiots (1998) is ethically rather than esthetically based. Bess's choice is ethical-religious, and her decisive act (the self-sacrifice) confirms her pact with (her internalized) God and her marriage pact. The sacrifice is a conscious act that radically leaves behind the Church congregation's esthetic ideal (and love of the word rather than of people). Bess abandons a relation to being and relates exclusively to becoming, to the difference her act can make. This is why the psychologist at the end of the film characterizes her as "good" (rather than "crazy"), in keeping with Climacus:

A person can *be both* good and evil, just as it is quite simply said that a human being has a disposition to both good and evil, but one cannot *simultaneously become* good and evil [...] Because we want the poet to depict human beings as they *are*, and every human being *is* both good and evil, and because the poet's medium is the medium of imagination, is being but not becoming, at most is becoming in a very foreshortened perspective. But take the individual out of this medium of imagination, out of this being, and place him in existence – then ethics immediately confronts him with its requirement, whether he now deigns to become, and then he becomes – either good or evil. (Kierkegaard's emphasis, Hong I, 420-21.)

Becoming does not only contain the act of sacrifice, in which the flesh is marked. The suffering lies just as much in everyday life's unfinished confrontation with the existential condition of incidental trivialities that shape us. The religiously responsible subject has lost "the relativity of immediacy, its diversion, its whiling away of time – precisely its whiling away of time" and suffers in an absolute relation to God, conscious that "[a] human being is capable of nothing at all; this he must always keep in mind." (Hong I, 486). Just what possibilities does the religious person have in life when esthetics and sense diversions are abandoned? He cannot go to a monastery, as this

choice is merely an outer (misunderstood) display of the relationship with God. But can he then go to the amusement park? – This is Climacus' rhetorical counter-question. The answer is at first negative, but then he argues that mankind is after all different from God and shows his humility by being human, removing himself from the absolute requirement and seeking diversion:

Our religious person chooses the way to the amusement park [...] So he goes out there. "But he does not enjoy himself," someone may say. Yes, he does indeed. And why does he enjoy himself? Because the humblest expression for the relationship with God is to acknowledge one's humanness, and it is human to enjoy oneself. (Hong I, 493).

The discussion of the status of the amusement park is lengthy in Climacus, since its function is to create an opening for humor in ethical and religious pathos. For according to Climacus, "[t]here are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there is a respectively corresponding *confinium* [border territory]: irony is the *confinium* between the esthetic and the ethical; humor is the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious." (Kierkegaard underlines, Hong I, 501-2). Humor marks the incongruence between the religious person's (hidden) relationship with God and what occurs in the world, that is, between a consciousness of the infiniteness of everything and the finiteness of everything. A divine as opposed to a human perspective.³ Thus, Climacus concludes section two with the introductory passage that starts as follows: "Therefore, it is just as questionable, precisely just as questionable, to be pathos-filled and earnest in the wrong place as it is to laugh in the wrong place. (Hong I,

³ Cp. Lars Erslev Andersen. 1994. "Humor – kontingens og fællesskab". Jørn Erslev Andersen, ed. *Passage*, 17. Århus: 1994.

525) – and thus we have returned to the beginning of this article and can now turn to *The Idiots*.

The amusement park and the living room

Climacus is of the opinion that a Christian in the 19th century can easily go to the amusement park. The difficult part is deciding to do so. The difficulty arises “[i]n the living room and on the coastal road to the amusement park [paa Strandveien til Dyrehaven]” (Hong I, 481). They also do this in *The Idiots*. But if one follows Climacus’ argument, the strength of Karen’s (Bodil Jørgensen) lack of a defense (in the living room) for her action – not going to her child’s funeral – should be seen in the light of the scenes from the amusement park. The slap in the face at the end (and Susanne’s [Louise Hassing’s] tears) serves as the sensory shock that finally anchors the viewer in Karen’s fate. A religious-pathetic dimension may emerge for the viewer in the juxtaposition of the scene in the living room and the apparently carefree visit to the amusement park Bakken. For Karen visits the amusement park *because of* her grief. She consciously goes to Bakken to amuse herself, and for her it is the only possibility of bearing the unbearable: having to bury her own child. The slap in the face comes as a consequence of the spastic jesting at the coffee table, where the cake and coffee flow slowly out of Karen’s mouth instead of being swallowed. This abject suggestion of the child’s way of eating demonstrates in an embarrassing way for everyone in the living room that Karen (like Bess) has resigned from the ascetic company of the Church (and her family), where feelings and women are just barely tolerated. Both Karen and Bess – and Dreyer’s Jeanne before them –

have a practically childish and inaccessible “relationship with God” that causes them to appear as pariahs, as headstrong idiots to everyone else. They do not obey an esthetic much less ethical interpretation of life and do not take care of themselves. They all provoke contradictory reactions from the viewers: the triumphant sympathy and distressing, idiosyncratic antipathy of laughter. In *The Idiots* it is not until the very end that one can discard the ironic interpretive strategy and fully surrender to the awkward character of Karen. If one does this, one is offered an interpretive basis for the entire film. However, if one does not accept this religious-pathetic perspective for the humor of the film, the two hours spent at the cinema are downright wasted.

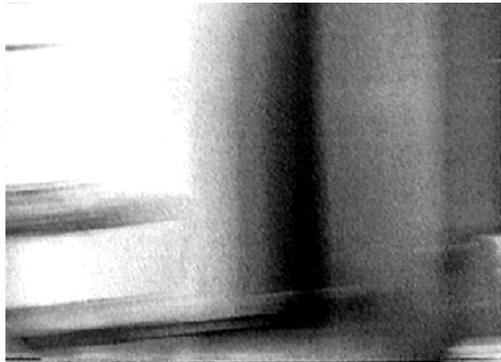
Karen thus freely demonstrates that Anders' (Hans Henrik Clemensen's) opinion – that it was because she “was not too sad” that she refrained from going to the funeral – is farfetched. On the contrary, Karen was in a state of shock over the death of her child, and couldn't bear to share her grief with others. She is an idiot in this word's etymological (Greek) definition: a private person. She is an idiot in the sympathetic definition: a retarded person whose emotional development corresponds to a four-year-old's (according to Trier's notes on her character). In contrast to the other jokesters, who act out their inner idiot as an (esthetically and ethically confrontational) idea, Karen is a true idiot who is unable to pretend. Something else is at stake. The possibility of showing her inner state at the coffee table as idiocy on the level of a child gives Karen the possibility of expressing that she not only has scars on her soul, but also marks in her flesh.

Neither in *The Idiots*, nor in Trier's manuscript, nor in the accompanying journal, let alone in Jesper Jargil's *De ydmygede*, which depicts the working process of *The Idiots* in the form of a documentary, is there reason to believe that Lars von Trier should have read Johannes Climacus' reflections on the extent to which the religious person in the 19th century ought to choose the way to the monastery or the way to the amusement park. Nor does it matter. Just as it is inconsequential for us to know whether Kierkegaard ever set foot in the amusement park *Dyrehaven*.⁴ It is probable that Kierkegaard's interest in this amusement park is due to the fact that it was a favorite romantic theme for describing popular entertainment, while in Trier's time the park practically marks the romantic theme as a cliché-filled framework for expensive entertainment. It is nonetheless noteworthy that the common interest in avoiding an esthetic judgement of an ethical manifesto⁵ very effectively uses *Dyrehaven* as the background for describing "true pathos." For this must necessarily be sensed. In Kierkegaard's text, the opposition of *Dyrehaven* and the religious requirement seems like a slap in the face. In Trier, it must be added as

⁴ *Dyrehaven* was established for recreation and hunting by Frederik III in 1669 and opened to the public in 1756. *Bakken* emerged as a market in connection with Kirsten Pil's sacred spring (which according to tradition was discovered in 1583 and rediscovered in 1732). Oehlensläger's *Et Sct. Hans Aftens Spil* (1802) depicts the life of fair performers, who around the year 1800 offered a Mester Jakel theatre, peep shows, marionette plays, mechanical theatre, and pantomime theatre. Tivoli, which was opened in 1843, was not mentioned by Kierkegaard. Source: *Den Store danske Encyklopædi*.

⁵ I see the dogma rules as an ethical manifesto that in referring to the director's ethos attempts to place limitations on his or her possibilities to manipulate. It is clear from Peter Rundle's interview with Lars von Trier ("We are all sinners"; www.dogme95) that rather than the realistic or documentary (esthetic) effect it is the director's creativity or lack of a safety net that is in demand.

a realistic shock that also stylistically breaks with the layout of the living room. The violence of the sudden movement depicted with the shaking of the hand-held camera comes to concern the viewer directly – as though it were her/him whose vision took a blow.



The camera follows Karen's head movements toward the left, then Anders' sudden hand movement in an arch to the right and back to the left, and in a prolonged movement (as though it were the camera that took the blow) by way of a cut to Susanne's open, sympathetic expression. All the idiot components of the film – the director/camera, actors, and viewer – are in play.

Moreover, if one recalls that Kierkegaard's volume 10 cited above provided the basic concepts for French existentialism after the war, the association becomes even more evident, leading to the idea that the dogma films, and perhaps *The Idiots* in particular, can in agreement with the dogma manifesto actually be regarded as a continuation of the confrontation with plot-structured descriptions of reality that were represented by the *nouvelle vague* (from the late 1950s).⁶ It is true that today, regardless of great differences, directors like Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol and Resnais, who took André Bazin's praise of the break with the tradition of mimesis as their starting point to experiment with the *possibilities* of the cinema (and developed the concept of the *auteur*), seem more romantic-individualistic than revolutionary – as it is put in the dogma manifesto. Still, it is easy to see that the directors who take into account the *nouvelle vague* and the dogma manifesto agree on wishing to describe something essential in the special cinematic coming into being of something "true" or something "real." To the sympathetic, confused viewer, *The Idiots* poses fundamental questions about what sets our esthetic criteria for evaluation – as do many of Godard's works. They share enthusiasm and stylistic courage. But *The Idiots* inquires perhaps outside an esthetic framework rather than inside, and it is in this sense that one can claim that Trier is more courageous or more revolutionary than Godard. It is also suggestive that Trier dons just as many masks as Kierkegaard in order to penetrate with a statement about life with a pathetic (ethical and

⁶ Trier mentions with enthusiasm that Jean-Luc Godard praised *The Idiots* as "great" (*Information*, 17 July, 1998).

religious) stamp.⁷ For throughout the century, not just religious but also esthetic pathos has been surrounded with disdain in the name of high-modernism,⁸ even though everyone no doubt can see today that it has been alive and well and visible and hearable to everyone, both within the ranks of modernism (in the cultivation of the genius and the avant-garde) and in popular culture (especially in the cinematic melodrama's and rock culture's appeal to their audiences).

Perhaps it was (as regards the film medium) the 1980s' ironic blend of genres, erosion of values and labyrinthine strategy that cleared the way for a non-Cartesian understanding of the subject as an impassioned unity of body and mind. Trier's own works, *Breaking the Waves*, whose melodramatic framework faded away and was transformed into ethical or subliminal pathos,⁹ and *Kingdom II*, which has given new meaning to the designation of "the grotesque," has consistently shifted the focus away from a re-presentation of the real. In the 1990s, Trier left behind the poetic pathos "the pathos of

⁷ In this film, Trier's masks spread across the entire spectrum in the production process. He is the author of the manuscript, (uncredited) director, camera man, interviewer *in* the film of his actors' characters *outside* and *after* the completion of the film, diarist, the person interviewed in the daily press, and (not least) the author of the dogma concept. Like Kierkegaard, what Trier achieves with his "pseudonymity or polynymity" (Hong I, 625), is that the viewers do not (only) understand his statements ironically. Each of them must be taken at face value. Everyone is thus free to interpret at discretion and according to one's own conviction. The brilliant thing about it is that one's "own conviction" will always be made plain in each interpretation.

⁸ The concept of "bathos" (Greek for depth) was introduced as early as 1727 by Alexander Pope as a rhetorical figure for "true modern poetry," which should consciously create an anti-climax in the pathetic striving toward the sublime.

⁹ Cp. my article "Spiritus Sanctus. Lidelse og Passion i *Breaking the Waves*," *Æstetikstudier V: Patos?*, ed. Niels Lehmann and Birgit Eriksson, 1998.

possibility, with actuality [virkeligheden] as an occasion", now more "maturely" posing himself (as does Climacus) the question of "one's own ethical actuality as infinitely more important than the interpretation of the whole world history (Hong I, 389).¹⁰ In *Kingdom II* it was the spiritual beings (without temporal or spatial mooring) and the Swedenborgian space that challenged the idea of a bodily and personal delimitation, while in *The Idiots* it is the Steinerian idea that people with Down's syndrome are like angels sent as a present to mankind. (Cp. Trier's description of the film's conceptual starting point in *De ydmygede*).

It is far from my task here to advocate that Trier and others along with him should really be understood religiously, much less that Kierkegaard should be. It is far more important for me to point out that currently Danish (and international) artists are (with or without inspiration from Kierkegaard's concepts of pathos) actually confronting "actuality as an occasion" or "the pathos of possibility" with a radically different "ethical actuality" (op. cit.). This reality concerns the subject's (i.e. the artist's) entire way of sensing and experiencing when confronting the world. The work becomes an expression of this confrontation and thus must also influence the viewer. Elements of horror and abject traces in an apparently realistic scenario have long been visible in art (cp. David Lynch, among others).¹¹ Today the very

¹⁰"This is going to sound pathetic, but somehow making film – yes, it was Dreyer who said that it was his only true passion – is a part of my existence." (*Information*, July 17, 1998).

¹¹Cp. among others *Gothic Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. Ed. Christoph Grüenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

idea of artistic re-presentation is being discussed. After the deconstructive and meta-fictional pointing out of esthetic-rhetorical patterns in each work, it is understandable that the interest is now directed toward that which conditions or lies outside esthetic representation.¹² This is why ethical questions become relevant in a digital world that otherwise makes each and every simulacrum possible. What a splendid liberation from the world, what unsuspected possibilities of esthetic manipulation, one might say! And yet at least one European tradition recedes. Like much current fine art photography, the dogma concept reflects what an artistic becoming or event might be without a referential base. And here humor and the “becoming mad” of esoteric language also plays a main role according to Gilles Deleuze:

The tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor. For if irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense. Humor is the art of surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always displaced aleatory point; it is the art of the static genesis, the savoir-faire of the pure event, and the »forth person singular« – with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished.¹³

In Trier, the idiot plays the role of the fourth person singular – and what is more: this role is also meant for the viewer, as is also evident from several reviews.¹⁴

¹² Dreyer already showed that this can be thematized with his film *Vampyr*. Cp. my reading of Roland Barthes’s reading of this film in “Trompe l’oeil og åndelige automater,” *Æstetikstudier VII*. Aarhus, 2000.

¹³ *The Logic of Sense* (London: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Bo Green Jensen writes in *Weekendavisen*: “*The Idiots* provokes hearty laughter and occasionally causes the smile to stiffen in the viewer’s reaction to his own reaction. It interweaves the embarrassing on more than the immediate levels. The

Ingeniously, one can (along with Climacus) very well regard Trier as being a “straying esthete” (Hong I, 454) in the field of ethics, one who does not experience pain or uncertainty, but who is more precisely an “esthetic coxcomb, a devil of a fellow who, figuratively speaking, wants to fraternize with God but, strictly speaking, does not relate himself to God at all” (Hong I, 455). But if one regards works of art as events rather than as representations, or as an interplay between fabula and sjuzet, the surface humor that takes the power away from meanings can actually (150 years after Climacus) give insight into “their eternal truth, that is, from the point of view of the substance which sub-tends them, independent of their spatio-temporal actualization in a state of affairs” (Deleuze, op. cit., 136). There are many examples of this strategy in *The Idiots*, and not everyone finds them equally funny. The confrontations between the self-appointed idiots and the sympathetic rockers call forth more laughter in me than the confrontations between the citizens and municipal officers of Søllerød County. Stoffer (Jens Albinus), who exposes the latter, depicts (intentionally on Trier’s part) psychological instability rather than foolishness, and for this reason one never completely surrenders to his interpretations. In the scene with the home buyers, Jeppe (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) makes a marginal remark (outside the manuscript) that together with the excellent facial mimicry of all the fools makes the idiocy perspective clear. Jeppe says impulsively, almost wonderingly, to the elegant lady (Paprika Steen): “Where zayn? Where zayn?” She replies as though it were a question: “The Seine – The Seine’s in Paris. Nice

film plays with each audience of interpreters crassly and with gusto, greatly

meeting you..." and laughs self-consciously, nervously and shyly at the same time while leaving. It is impossible to tell whether Jeppe's remark is profound or meaningless.¹⁵ The same suggestion of a possible meaning that becomes absurd in its singularity is also present in the imagery. Not so much in the outright vulgarities at the level of the jokes (mayonnaise instead of sun lotion or skiing in the summer), but rather in movements that only sporadically make sense (three naked men running after half-naked Susanne, filmed as though they were children).

The Idiots is a film that challenges moral and esthetic judgements and that in a display of all kinds of judgements in this field sets the stage for another agenda, the ethical-religious one. The battle lines are drawn up with a humor that is far from being as "earnest-obtuse" as the smart-alecky poster text on Axel's (Knud Romer Jørgensen) advertising agency: "He wants to make companies into religions." Trier does not want to make film into religion, nor plead for a religiousness in the film, but most likely he would like to get us to "laugh with the fool."

emphasizing Trier's talents as a diabolical humorist."

¹⁵ In the documentary *De ydmygede*, Trier picks up the thread and uses the expression with just as much wonder in his voice as Jeppe.

On The Celebration

The Celebration: Classical Drama and Docu Soap Style

Palle Schantz Lauridsen

Not long ago I had the opportunity of addressing an audience of French students on the subject of Danish cinema. Knowing that the Dogma 95 films were well known to French audiences, I screened *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg. After the screening I asked the students whether the characteristic cinematography and editing of the film had blocked their understanding of its subject matter. "No," the answer resounded, "we're used to watching MTV."

I was surprised by the answer, and I still believe that *The Celebration* is not an MTV movie, if such a thing exists. Although contradicted by the mere popularity of the film it might – from the point of view of the aesthetics of classical Hollywood – be said that *The Celebration* resists audience comprehension violating as it does one classical rule after the other, thus resembling the MTV style. Its stylistic format is, however, not that of the glossy MTV videos, but rather that of docu soaps, other formats of reality television, old-time documentary film and cinéma vérité. In relation to the subject matter of the film, the family celebration, the docu soap format authenticates the film although the professional cinematography (by Anthony Dod Mantle) and editing (by Valdis Oskarsdóttir) is more elaborate than television production

economy typically allows. Considering the fact that *The Celebration* is, however, not (only) made for TV, but for theatrical release, the notion of art cinema becomes relevant.

What interests me in this short article is the relation between the art cinema/docu soap style on the one hand and the classical dramaturgy on the other. The dramaturgical angle is also relevant considering the fact that the dogma manifesto openly criticizes dramaturgy, stating that "Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance", indicating that we should stop doing so. One might thus expect *The Celebration* not to follow the predictable rules of dramaturgy. Director Thomas Vinterberg, however, explained in an interview that he gave up that idea at a very early stage (Jensen 1998: 15).

Dramaturgical analysis of *The Celebration*

It is easy to see that *The Celebration* takes place in a secluded space, the small castle, within around 24 hours and that it deals with one central story. Having only this information one might – correctly – assume that the film observes the rules of classical Aristotelian drama (the unity of time, place, and action). The *temporal* framing of the action is defined by the arrival of the guests, the preparation for the celebration, the celebration itself, and the epilogue of that celebration. *Spatially* the drama is set at the small castle and the unifying *action* of the story is the revelation of a family secret, i.e., the fact that the father whose 60th birthday is the reason for the celebration, sexually abused two of his children when they were small.

By analyzing in further detail the dramaturgical structure of the film, I now wish to underline the thesis that the film dramaturgically speaking is highly conventional.

The bottom line of dramaturgy is that stories consist – or for some dramaturgists *should* consist – of a number of phases. The number of phases vary as a result of the degree of detail wanted by the individual dramaturgist, but regardless of their actual number the phases are always in a fixed order. Danish writer Trine Breum presents the paradigm of dramaturgy in six phases in the following order:¹

1. Prelude
2. Presentation (including the 1st turning point)
3. Clarification (including the point of no return)
4. Escalation of the conflict (including the 2nd turning point)
5. Climax
6. Fade

The *prelude* introduces the theme and the conflict of the story. The prelude of *The Celebration* is limited to the first five scenes. In the first scene we see Christian, the son, come marching down a hilly country road. His cell-phone beeps and from fragments of the conversation we gather that something shocking will take place during the evening, but that Christian believes he can handle it. He then meets his brother Michael and during the next three scenes their sister, Helene, is also introduced.

¹ The Danish terms are as follows: 1. anslag, 2. præsentation, 3. uddybning, 4. konfliktoptræning, 5. klimaks, 6. Udtoning.

The *presentation* explains the who, what, where and when of the film. In *The Celebration* it consists of the presentation of family and friends (and of the relations between these), and it takes place in connection with the arrival at the castle at which the action will take place. Important parts of this phase are 1) the presentation of the father, Helge, and the mother, Else, and of their relations to their son, Christian, and 2) the subsequent increasingly intense, crosscut 12 minute sequence depicting the two brothers and the sister in their respective rooms. This sequence culminates in four very short scenes related to Helene's discovery of the late sister's suicide letter. The contents of the letter are withheld from the audience until later, but from Helene's exorcising repetition "They must not find it, they must not find it," we understand the importance of it. The very strong marking of the discovery of the letter simultaneously marks what Breum calls the *first turning point*, i.e., "the change interfering with and changing the so far harmonious situation (Breum: 62) which also marks the "transition from the presentation to the clarification" (ibid.)

In the beginning of the *clarification* phase the celebration takes off with before dinner drinks and entree. After the entree the eldest son, Christian, is to deliver the first speech, which marks the *point of no return*. From here there is no way out. The family secret has been revealed and as the staff led by Christian's childhood friend, the chef Kim, intervenes and steals the guests' car keys, even the guests – literally speaking – have no way out.

The *escalation of the conflict* depicts the attempts of the characters to

outmaneuver each other. Helene, the sister, calls Christian “insane”; Helge, the father, uses all his patriarchal authority in trying to put Christian back in place; Else, the mother, tries to pass the whole thing off by referring to Christian’s vivid imagination; and Michael, the brother, reacts violently. The brothers enter into a number of clashes, which, however, lead to no clarification. Michael is so afraid of his father that he does exactly what he is told, so when the father asks him to keep a watchful eye on everything, he interprets this literally and twice throws Christian out. Assisted by two male guests he even ties Christian to a tree in a nearby wood. At first only the staff and Helene’s boy friend, Gbartokai, side with Christian. This phase ends with the *second turning point* in which Helene cannot repress her knowledge of the suicide letter any longer and thus reads it aloud. The father admits his incestuous crime stating that the children did not deserve better.

Everybody is now convinced that Christian has been telling the truth all along, but still Michael's reaction has not been depicted. He, who so far has explicitly denied the idea of incest, becomes the active part in the *climax* phase. Totally disconcerted he beats up his father and is about to urinate over him when Christian intervenes and overhears the completely defeated father saying: “Kill me!”

In the *fade*, the last approximately five minutes of the film, we are at breakfast. Michael becomes the character who expels the father, who even loses the support of his wife. She chooses to remain at the breakfast table while he leaves the room totally defeated.

Analyzing the temporal and causal relations within the film one also finds a classical, dramaturgical structure. At almost any given point we know exactly where the action takes place and we understand the causal relations between the elements. There are for instance many examples of common *set up/pay off* mechanisms, i.e., of elements or character traits which are presented (set up) in order to be used later (pay off). An example has to do with Helene hiding the suicide letter in a painkiller tube. This action is a set up for the pay off later when Pia finds that same letter after having been asked – by Helene – to go get her painkillers.

One could go further into the dramaturgical aspects of the film, but the point should be clear by now: in terms of dramaturgy *The Celebration* is indeed very classic.

There are, however, certain 'flaws' in this classic structure. Some of them break with classic rules of coherence, others join forces in providing the film with a metaphysical, mystical dimension.

1. *Set up without pay off*: who is Christian talking to on the cell phone in the opening shot? It is definitely a co-conspirator but the film never reveals his or her identity. The mystery is left unsolved, and the telephone conversation does not point forward toward a pay off but only serves to inform us that Christian's revelation is well planned.²

² In the script the conversation is a set up to a scene where Christian's pregnant friend (who is not his girl friend) arrives to pick him up, a plan agreed upon in a part of the conversation present only in the script.

2. *Mystical dimension*. Several events in the film and the way in which they are related are inexplicable within daily life cause-and-effect logic. One clear example is what happens in the wake of Helene's shouting "boo" at the receptionist after discovering the crucial suicide letter in her room. Described earlier as marking the first turning point the "boo" initiates a sequence of cross cutting between the events in the rooms of Helene, Christian, and Michael respectively. This lies beyond everyday explanations of cause and effect: the fact that one person shouts "boo" in one room can only be the reason for the sudden events taking place in other rooms if the shout can be heard in the other rooms. That is in no way indicated in *The Celebration* and what is suggested by the editing when Michael falls in the shower, when Christian loses his glass, when Pia suddenly breaks out of the water in the bathtub is that the discovery of the letter is important to everybody – beyond causality.

3. 'Goofs'. There are also a few 'goofs' in *The Celebration*. In one scene for instance Michael adds five years to his father's age talking as he does about his 65th birthday, and the German toastmaster gets away with calling Helge his "dänisches Vater" and Else his "dänisches Mutter" instead of referring correctly to them as his "dänischer Vater" and "dänische Mutter".

Stylistic analysis of *The Celebration*

Though very classic at the level of the dramaturgical paradigm these small examples show that *The Celebration* is flawlessly Hollywood. This becomes even more clear when considering the film's style. It is

easy to note that lightning, camera movements, and editing of the film differ from classical Hollywood. The aesthetics of *The Celebration* provides the film with a strong documentary coding, no matter how fictitious the story and how Aristotelian the dramaturgy.

A few brief examples of the cinematography and the editing in the opening sequence must carry the burden of proof. First of all it should, however, be noted that generally speaking the film is told in a chronological, progressive way. There are no uncommon or unaccounted for jumps between different spatial, temporal and psychological dimensions. The dimensions of time, space, and reality are only unclear in the sequence depicting Christian's collapse. As a rule the joining of scenes of the film is characterized by an alternation between a progressive line of action taking place in one location on the one hand and sequences cross cutting – in parallel montage – between events taking place at different locations on the other.

The Dogma Rules determine parts of the style of *The Celebration*. This is obvious in the case of lightning – or rather the absence of lightning. The dogma rule prohibiting artificial lightning – in relation with the technical re-recording from the original video tapes to the 35 mm release prints – results in very grainy images, especially in very dark parts and parts with great contrast between light and darkness. Another stylistic element directly derived from the rules is the absence of underscore music. There is diegetic music – a couple of songs, a little piano music – but no 'film music proper'. The hand held camera also mentioned in the rules accounts for images in some, but definitely

not all, scenes being very shaken (which they – according to the rules – do not have to be).

Other stylistic characteristics of *The Celebration* cannot be deduced directly from the rules but are specific interpretations of them. This is the case with the alternations between close ups and long shots on the one hand and level and canted frames on the other, and also in the many 'violations' of the 180 degree rule. Let me demonstrate these specific interpretations by analyzing in some detail the opening shots of the film.

The opening sequence

The very first shot (1) is a normal establishing shot. A long shot of a man entering the diegesis as he walks towards the camera down a



Shot 1: Long shot of Christian, front view



Shot 2: Medium, wide, low angle shot of Christian, rear view

country road.³ The cut from the first to the second shot of the film (2),

³ The relationship between sound and image, however, is a bit strange in as far as the point of view and the point of audition differ. We are visually far away, but auditively very close as we are able to overhear Christian's lines. This sound

however, announces the style we are to expect during the whole of the film. The cut from the long shot front view of Christian (1) to a medium wide angle shot of him seen from behind (2) is not by the book. Christian even almost drops out of the frame. It might also be noted that in (2) the sky is very blue whereas in the following shot (3), showing a backlit front view of Christian, it is almost white. This suggests a breaking of a rule of continuity stating that the colors of the same objects must not change from one shot to the next.



Shot 3: Front shot of Christian, low angle, backlit



Shot 4a: Long shot, through windshield, rear view

In the 4th shot we see – with no outside shot establishing its point in time and space – from inside a car in motion (4a). From a long shot

perspective does not correspond to our everyday experience which functions according to the rule “small people, small voices – big people, big voices,” but using sound this way is not unusual in feature films, focusing as they do on the intelligibility of dialogue.

through the windshield there is a pan to the driver of the car (Michael) and from him to his wife and children on the backseat. A close frame-by-frame-look at the transition between the shots 4 and 5 reveals a jump cut showing Michael looking to the left at the end of shot 4 (4b) and to the right at the beginning of shot 5 – with the horizon 'jumping up and down'.



Shot 4b: Michael looking left



Shot 5: Michael looking right

Looking closer at the meeting of the two brothers in the subsequent 'I fuck you'-sequence it turns out to be quintessential to the visual style of *The Celebration*, as crossings of the axis of action is more common than not in this sequence. The camera moves constantly around the characters, the horizontal line is rarely stable and in one case the horizon is even vertical! The characters, Michael and Christian, are sometimes in the frame, at other times outside it, and sometimes the



The vertical horizon



Crossing the axis of action, 1



Crossing the axis of action, 2



Crossing the axis of action, 3

the shots are so close to the characters that it is difficult to determine what we see. Having drawn attention to these stylistic features, I believe I have made a point. Regardless of its otherwise classical dramaturgy, a few 'flaws' and especially the radically different cinematography and editing make *The Celebration* a highly unconventional theatrical feature film. This only goes to show that film makers constantly are able to renew film language and that there is no contradiction between a dramaturgically classic story and an innovative style. In *The Celebration* an elaborate version of televisual docu soap aesthetics functions to authenticate the classic story of the family drama.

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The Agitated Camera

A diagnosis of Anthony Dod Mantle's camera work in *The Celebration*

Thomas Lind Laursen

This brief essay proposes an analysis of the camera work in Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* and concludes with an intentionally provocative critique of that camera work and the dogma concept which inspired it.

The Celebration is made to look like a home video – the sort which is customarily shot at family get-togethers. As such the choice of medium befits the setting as well as the subject of the film. Even more so because the grainy, fragmentary video picture offers an emblematic image of the family ties, and because the handheld camera produces an overwhelming phenomenological account of the hectic and claustrophobic experience of a family reunion.

There are no classical p.o.v. shots in *The Celebration*, only conversational ones (i.e. 'over-the-shoulder-shots').¹ In an illusory way these shots seem the more simple and less constructed of the two since the camera (in theory) can work without the participation of the recorded characters, seeing that it doesn't have to swap positions with them. Therefore the nearly exclusive use of conversational p.o.v. shots

¹ Only once in the film, when Christian is looking out his bedroom window, does the film provide us with a nearly classical p.o.v. shot (lacking only the first shot of the eyes that are seeing in order to constitute a so-called 'p.o.v. sandwich').

in effect makes the film look like a simple amateur recording, even if this is far from being the actual case.² But it does more than this. It reduces the viewer of the film to a witness rather than a participator when it comes to the *emotional* focus of the film, as it makes us relate to rather than identify with its central character.³

Yet the *physical* focus of the film differs significantly from the emotional focus as the camera tries to create for the viewer the illusion of actually being present at the family estate and of nearly taking part in the characters' actions (be it embracing others or fighting them). To this end the camera proves a probing, intrusive, and somewhat uncultivated registrar carrying out its strategy to such a degree that at one point it actually ventures into the very bag in which Mette is looking for Michael's shoes. Likewise, earlier in the film, the camera comes so close to its characters that Mette's rejection of Michael's embrace causes Michael's hand to hit the camera (providing as it were, the home video equivalent of the spattered blood on Janusz Kaminski's camera in *Saving Private Ryan*). In this way the camera, figuratively speaking, assaults or lets itself be assaulted by its objects. Thus the narrative theme of physical injustice is treated even in the form of the film. The violent aspect of the camera work is furthermore indicated in the nearly abstract images it repeatedly produces.

² *The Celebration* displays a classical film construction: apart from the earlier mentioned use of conversational p.o.v. structures (which despite their seemingly innocent authenticity are of course cinematographic constructs) the film for instance features many elaborate cross-cutting sequences.

In fact the camera in *The Celebration* displays an intense fixation with bodies. It therefore never lingers on unoccupied spaces.⁴ And though there are some cases of pre-positioning (i.e. pre-framing) in the film (nearly all of which are in effect cases of the pre-destination of the narrative's development), the camera will follow, rather than lead the characters.⁵ In addition, it clearly favours close-ups and extreme close-ups in preference to any other type of shot, focusing especially on faces and hands, the latter revealing among other things Christian's neurosis and Helene's fidgety behavior in a manner reminiscent of Robert Bresson.⁶ And though there are some reaction shots recorded in calm close-ups (especially during the speeches at the dining table), the close shots in *The Celebration* are generally linked to distortion, crooked angles, and jerky movement. Long shots, on the other hand, are always calm.

In a television interview made in the eighties the celebrated singer/songwriter Elvis Costello admitted to having what he himself considered a flaw in his musical abilities. Whenever he raised his voice

³ Still there is no doubt that *The Celebration* is Christian's story. He is the protagonist, he changes things, he himself changes during the story, and it is with him that the film begins and ends.

⁴ Though there is a noteworthy exception to this, to which I shall return later.

⁵ For instance the camera waiting somewhat ominously for Christian to open the door to the parents' annex and enter the dark hallway that will take him to his father; the camera waiting out of focus in order to focus on Helene and the receptionist as they come to tidy up Linda's old bedroom (an interprise that will eventually result in the discovery of the fateful goodbye note); and the camera waiting for the enlightened Michael to emerge from the darkness to engage in near patricide.

⁶ Christian is shown to wipe his fingers nervously and the camera noses in on Helene's smoking.

while singing he would involuntarily tear the strings of his guitar – and vice versa – as though there had been an unbreakable bond between the mutually contagious stylistic elements, both of which seem likewise easily agitated. It is from this ‘Costello-syndrome’ that the cinematographic elements in *The Celebration* seem to suffer.⁷ When recording turbulent motion the camera will itself become unsteady. When recording still or calm situations it too will be still and calm. The cause for the camera to get upset is therefore neither audible/vocal (as the example given below concerning Helge’s reaction to Helene’s speech will show), nor emotional (the first time Christian faces his father in the film, his emotional turmoil is conceived in close-ups of his nervous gestures – not in the camera movement, which is calm and composed). Being an easily agitated camera, it still reacts solely on physical cues. Examples of these abound: Michael’s awkward embrace of Christian, the fights between the two, the excited activity of the family members arriving in the parking lot, etc., etc. Yet the best example is the scene showing us Helge’s reaction to being ignored by the waiters when demanding to have a bottle of port sent up to Helene so that he can propose a toast to her despite her devastating speech. As long as he is still sitting at the table, the camera observing him remains similarly balanced and composed (even though he raises his voice considerably). Only when he actually rises from his seat and demonstratively slams his fist on the table does the camera ‘awaken’

⁷ Let me just note that I do not find this peculiarity of Costello’s to be a deficiency in his musicality but rather a charming facet, integral to his admirable style – much as is the case with Anthony Dod Mantle’s camera work in *The Celebration*. My term ‘the Costello-syndrome’ is thus merely meant as a descriptive rather than a derogatory term.

and 'shy away' from him, trying at the same time to follow the trajectory of the cutlery which he throws at the waiters.⁸

There is another set of camera movements in *The Celebration* which stand in clear contrast to the nervous camera style I have described until now: namely a number of remarkably restful and static shots, or slowly gliding camera movements. They are frequently accompanied by a soundless soundtrack and are often shot from positions far from the people observed – primarily from a bird's eye view or from unoccupied rooms (where a silent wind is seen lifting long white curtains, just to make sure the audience understands the significance of the shots). These shots obviously constitute a sort of 'ghost view' meant to belong to Christian's dead twin sister Linda. They display a composure and breadth of view which the previously mentioned camera obviously cannot attain. At other times though, this ghost view is recorded from positions halfway hidden behind beds and balustrades, under chairs and tables, suggesting a frightened frame of mind and a cautious distance to the living.

As far as I can see there are three justifications for including these ghost shots in the film: First of all their possibly unsettling atmosphere and effect (drawing our attention at one and the same time to things in the past as well as to things yet to come), and secondly their function of relief from what might otherwise easily have turned out to be a somewhat strenuous, visual onslaught of a never-ceasing, restless

⁸ The editing of the film will often function in a fashion similar to this as it tends to cut to arresting action: such as matches been striken, doors being opened, people falling, dropping glasses etc. etc. – i.e. on physical cues.

camera. Not only is the 'normal/non-spectral' camera obsessed with bodies – in a way it almost seems to signify one itself. The physicality of the camera movements is so intense as to nearly make the camera a tangible entity: a living individual. It is therefore appropriate that the point of view of the ghost – being metaphysical, without bodily limitations and fears – does not share the frantic, feverish quality of the 'other' camera but rather appears settled and somewhat superior.⁹ This, then, is the third reason for including the ghost shots in the film: to emphasize – by negation – that the peculiar movement of the 'living' camera in the film is a manifestation of the timid, yet agitated psychosomatic effect of a sexual assault. It is in other words to be perceived as a symptom.

With its constant swish-pans, tracking (or rather carried) shots, and quick zooms in and out (as though it were a trombone), nothing is done in order to conceal the camera's presence. On the contrary, the camera work in *The Celebration* is so clearly visible that it can almost be said to call attention to itself – and this even more so because Anthony Dod Mantle in his eagerness to create stunning images reveals the hand that held the camera three times during the film.¹⁰ In his

⁹ It is, by the way, somewhat strange that the less physical the beholder of the contrasting point of views the more specific its identity. Both camera styles seem to constitute the p.o.v. of an extra person. But the ghost shot (even though it belongs to no *body*) obviously belongs to somebody (namely Linda) whereas the 'normal/living' camera, despite its extreme physicality, doesn't really belong to anybody in specific. (My division of the camera work into the recordings of a 'normal/living' and a 'ghostly/undead' camera is of course merely meant to provide descriptive, analytical terms).

¹⁰ Once in the rear view mirror of a car, once in the sunglasses worn by Helene, and once in the mirror in Mette's and Michael's bedroom. These 'mistakes' can again be said to emphasize the amateurish home video quality of the film.

endeavor to create the illusion of presence, he succeeds in revealing the presence of the illusion-maker, turning the camera, as already mentioned, into a nearly palpable presence – almost as though it were an additional family member: an extra fictional person.

One might go so far as to say that much of the camera movement in *The Celebration* is movement for movement's sake.¹¹ At any rate it seems important to ask what justifies the film's extravagant camera work.

The two most obvious (and immediately reasonable) answers to this question would be that the camera work finds its inspiration and origin in either the main character's neurosis or in the claustrophobic and feverish intensity of family life.¹² Still, it seems strange that the portrayal of the space occupied by Christian and his family should not change after the culmination of the evening's events and the ensuing reorganization of the family's hierarchic structure.¹³ We are made to believe that the tension of tempers is relaxed at the end of the film. Significantly Christian has seemingly overcome his emotional problems as we see him inviting Pia (whose affections he has earlier

¹¹ For instance the shot at the beginning of the film, where Michael's car arrives at the estate, seems notably overdramatized. It is possible that this shot is thought as a ghost view, but this seems unlikely as it differs in far too many ways from the later shots of this kind. Furthermore one would think that Vinterberg would be more anxious to make sure that the audience understood the shot's metaphysical significance had this been his aim.

¹² *Every family has its secrets* states the subtitle of *The Celebration*.

¹³ In addition, as was argued earlier, the film ought to have been shot differently had the emotional (psychological) and the physical focus of film been meant to correlate.

been unable to return) with him to his home in Paris. Likewise the rest of the family seem relatively restful following a good night's sleep after the tumultuous evening. Yet there is no redemption to be deciphered in the movement of the camera at the end of the film. After Helge is seen lying defeated on the lawn whispering "kill me", the camera, in an unusually calm pan, follows a bird across the sky as a new day dawns (!).¹⁴ This is succeeded by what is probably the most profoundly composed, stabilized, and moderate shot in the entire film: in a long (establishing (!)) shot the mansion is seen lying quietly and peacefully (with no sign of human activity as yet to be seen) as a mist slowly dissolves on the lake beside it (!).¹⁵ Then the breakfast table is seen being set by the servants – still everything is peaceful and quiet. But as soon as the family members start gathering at the table the camera again becomes jumpy and nervous. The necessary and predictable confrontation with the evil father has taken place, yet by the time the breakfast table is fully occupied the camera behaves just as it did earlier in the film.

In my opinion this must mean that neither Christian nor the family as a whole are to be regarded as the cause of (or indeed to be blamed for) the camera work in the film. For in this case, following the film's own logic, the camera ought to have been relaxed and composed. Rather, I

¹⁴ Here again physicality is seen to be of paramount importance in *The Celebration*. Of the two brothers' confrontations with their father it is Michael's physical approach (as opposed to Christian's psychological one) that has the most conclusive effect.

¹⁵ This is the notable exception to the camera's disinterest in unoccupied spaces, mentioned earlier.

believe, the explanation is to be found within the principles on which the film was made – i.e. the dogma rules.

I would suggest that the cause of the special camera style in *The Celebration* is that the dogma concept is hysterical.¹⁶ However far-fetched this may sound, I find – considering the topic of the film, its display of psychological realism, the camera's extreme obsession with bodies, as well as the dogmatic equation of extravagant cinematography with sex (hence the 'vow of chastity') – that it is not only fair but also appropriate to continue discussing *The Celebration* by using a psychosomatic terminology. Even more so since the term 'hysterical' applies not only to the dogma project but to the film's main character as well.

The dominant characteristics of hysteria can be defined as "shallow, labile emotions, manipulative behavior, a tendency to overdramatize situations, a lack of self-criticism, and a fickle flirtatiousness with little capacity for sustained sexual relationships".¹⁷ Christian obviously displays *labile emotions, manipulative behavior* and a *lack of capacity for sustained sexual relationships* as is indicated in his relationship with Pia – up until the mentioned change at the end of the film.¹⁸

¹⁶ I not only find this to be evidently revealed in the last scene, but to be true of the film as a whole. Regarding the dogma concept, the term 'hysteria' is admittedly used here in a slightly derogative sense. This is, however, not the case in my treatment of Christian's personality disorder.

¹⁷ Whitlock, F.A. *Hysteria*. IN: Gregory, Richard L. (Ed.). *The Oxford Companion to The Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 333-334.

¹⁸ In addition Christian displays two further symptoms of hysteria, namely "feelings of constriction in the throat" (suitably emphasizing the film's preoccupa-

Regarding the hysteria of the Dogma Brothers, they are, to take them at their word, uninterested in (or unable to enjoy) *a sustained sexual relationship* – meaning, in their own vocabulary, the creation of an extravagant cinematographic construct.¹⁹ Instead they have chosen an anti-aesthetic film style which will inevitably *overdramatize situations* as it finds its primus motor in an incessantly active camera at all times involved in avoiding and disrupting any possible Americanization of the image (i.e. any invisibility of camera work or editing). This happens regardless of the subject of individual scenes. In return the film is never really allowed to dwell upon its characters, leaving their postulated *emotions shallow* as a result. Despite its being based on a set of creative commandments (which indeed seem to *lack self-criticism*) the outcome is of course every bit as *manipulative* as any other type of film.

tion with speech: for instance Christian's formal speeches, Linda's whispering and Michael's yelling) and a "dissociation" appearing in the form of fugues, twilight states or trances (perfectly designating the two visual instances regarding Linda during Christian's unconscious [sleeping and later comatose] condition). Dissociation is also known to appear as multiple personality disorders (as is the case with Christian's childhood alter ego Snut). This phenomenon of dissociation is regarded as a means of "escaping from an intolerable situation or suffering from a severe depression. This wandering behaviour has been equated with an act of suicide, with the patient seeking some state of nirvana which will free him from his worldly cares and responsibilities". This fits well with Christian's condition. Even the closing notion of suicide is relevant to his case as it not only points back to the sad cause of death for his twin sister Linda but also points forward to his own readiness to join her in the afterlife ("shall I come with you?" he asks her during his last vision). (Quotes: Ibid.)

¹⁹ By using the term 'vow of chastity' it seems the Dogma Brothers are saying that they believe an indelicate injustice to have been committed against the film medium by the American, Spielbergized movie makers. As though it had indeed been raped. This is of course every bit as ridiculous as it sounds. Still, as a parallel to Christian's case, it provides an interesting explanation as to where the dogmatic hysteria stems from.

“The film is not to take place where the camera is positioned, but is to be shot where the film is taking place” one of the commandments of the dogma rules reads. By treating the constructiveness of cinematography as though it had been false and impure, the dogma film comes to favor a feverish spontaneity that finds its perfect instrument in the handheld camera. Likewise, contempt for the artificiality of film provokes the Dogma Brothers to renounce all aesthetic taste (as demanded by their set of rules). Among other things this results in the disharmonious camera style discussed in this essay. In his eagerness to destroy the harmonious image (and display the disharmonious family) at any price, Vinterberg continues his stylistic strategy beyond the point where it should have ceased.

Through the art of low budget limitation ‘professed’ by their ‘profound’ set of rules, the Dogma Brothers implicitly claim to have gained access to a certain insight neglected by superficial million dollar productions. As if they had found a way to look right through the extravaganza of American moviemaking to a filmmaking more real and pure. This, then, is also the aim of Thomas Vinterberg’s dogma film. Still, due to the hysterically ideological service in which the cinematographic components of the film are used, these components end up disrupting the stylistic integrity of the narrative, thereby revealing the film to be neither more nor less superficial than the type of film it so eagerly sought to oppose.

The Celebration of Rules

Claus Christensen

Could the manuscript for *The Celebration* have been realised outside the framework of Dogma 95? Undoubtedly. Would that have made it as good a movie? Most likely not.

The secret behind the success of *The Celebration* lies in the linking of a classic family drama with the handheld aesthetics dictated by Dogma 95. The story of a son's revolt against his father might as well in principle have been a tragedy by Shakespeare, a modern play by Lars Norén, or – for that matter – yet another of the cosmetic Hollywood productions against which the Dogma manifesto was directed. But Thomas Vinterberg tells his story in a documentary style, thus combining the strength of two genres otherwise kept strictly apart: the power of identification and the effective curves of suspense characteristic of fiction, and the reality effect of documentarism, i.e. the feeling of being present here-and-now in a space which is not staged or directed, and where anything can happen.

Watching *The Celebration* is, to put it directly, like participating in the "celebrations" yourself. You are present at the dinner table when Christian stands up, strikes his glass, and gives the shocking birthday speech to his father, Helge. You are the innocent bystander during the whole of this thrilling power struggle, where Helge uses almost every means to make Christian shut up before finally having to admit that

the battle is lost. The embarrassing episodes and the absurd atmosphere in which the toastmaster of the party, against all odds, is trying to keep up appearances and keep a stiff upper lip, spreads to the audience making the watching of the movie both teasingly unpredictable and crushingly claustrophobic. It is a voyeurism that makes you yourself feel exposed.

This effect is especially reached through the camera work by Anthony Dod Mantle. The shaky DV-pictures out of focus simulate a truly amateur home video, but sometimes the camera also turns into an objective – though somewhat mysterious – surveillance camera. By and by, as we become involved in Christian's struggle for truth, the inquisitive camera also achieves an element of journalistic investigation or detective-like scrutiny. The camera finds its way behind the jovial facade and into the far corners to expose the horrible truth at the heart of the family: incest. Thus the camera – and Vinterberg! – cannot be accused of violating the privacy of the family or indecently exposing them, driven by mere lust for sensation. We have entered private property, that's true, but the camera is working in the service of truth. And although the exposure of Helge's crimes does not lead to legal proceedings in the traditional sense, it is both morally and psychologically necessary. Christian and the other members of the family can only be released from the demons of the past if the truth is brought to light.

In other words, Thomas Vinterberg transforms the technical limitations of Dogma 95 into new narrative possibilities with *The*

Celebration. And it is not just a question of old wine in new bottles. The improvised way of recording and the minimal aesthetics create not only a "documentary" intensity, but actively interfere with the drama, influence our perception of the action, and produce meaning. But how is this actually achieved? How does the interaction between a classic drama and the aesthetics of Dogma manifest itself? In which places do the Dogma rules present a boost to the story, and where are they instead a straitjacket? Which of the ideas in the manuscript was Vinterberg unable to realise in a satisfying manner, or obliged to drop completely?

Classic dramaturgy

As mentioned above, the manuscript could easily have been realised in a classic movie format. There is nothing "avantgardistic" in the story, which to some degree apparently is based on a true case¹, and to some degree draws its inspiration from *Hamlet*. The fashionable manor presents a miniature society, a small kingdom with a cold and brutal king (Helge) as the ruler, his opportunistic queen (Else), their rebellious son (Christian), and the wild, but good-hearted daughter (Helene), henchmen and aspirants to the throne (the toastmaster Helmuth von Sachs and Michael, the youngest son), a decadent bourgeoisie (the guests), and a hard-working proletariat (the staff).

¹ In the radio programme *Koplevs krydsfelt*, DR P1, 28 March 1996, a young man told about his stepfather's sexual abuse and about the speech of truth, he himself gave at the celebration of the 60th birthday. But the anonymous radio guest has never made himself public, and the story might very well be more or less fictional. See my article "Festen der forsvandt", *Weekendavisen*, 5-11 May 2000.

Christian and Helge are respectively the hero and the villain in a long and tough psychological power struggle, a true tug-of-war, in which each party has his allies and uses cunning tricks, and in which Helene turns out to be the decisive factor, when she – spurred on by the racist behaviour of both Michael and the rest of the participants towards her black boyfriend – sides with Christian and reads out loud the goodbye letter of the deceased sister: the final evidence against Helge.

Nor is there anything “avantgardistic” in the narrative structure of the movie, in spite of the unambiguous Dogma revolt against classic dramaturgy: “Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance.” But this critique has not manifested itself in a concrete commandment in the Vow of Chastity², and *The Celebration* is quite conventionally divided into four dramaturgical phases: *Presentation* (the arrival, Helge’s welcome speech, the hors d’oeuvre, and Christian’s speech), *Complication* (Helene’s speech, Else’s speech, the abduction of Christian), *Confrontation* (Linda’s suicide letter, Michael’s assault), and *Resolution* (Helge’s goodbye speech).

As in all classic dramas, the movie keeps the unity of time, space, and action, as we follow the normal scheme of a family celebration, from the arrival of the guests to the common breakfast table the morning after. The established *set up* is characterized by jovial entertainment and all too hectic teasing, but also a certain tenseness up to the first *turning point*, where Christian drops the bomb in his so-called speech of truth. The rest of the movie is a thrilling, ingenious, and at certain

² Closest is the rule number 5: “The film must not contain superficial action”, and rule number 8: “Genre movies are not acceptable”.

points, hilariously absurd battle between Helge, who does his best to cover up everything, and Christian, who stubbornly hangs on and time and again spoils “the good mood”.

The conflict really tightens when Christian interrupts his mother’s speech, accuses the whole group in a very harsh manner, and is removed as an unwanted misfit by his younger brother Michael and a couple of guests. The *second turning point* of the movie is Helene’s reading of Linda’s suicide letter (the central prop of the drama), which has already been introduced in the set up and which now clears the way for the resolution of the conflict: Helge admits to having raped his twins, Christian and Linda.

A *final moment of suspension* is Michael’s desperate, nocturnal assault on the fallen king and humiliated father, but Christian turns up as his father’s saviour in a classic, but understated *last minute rescue*. Even the worst of criminals has the right to a minimum of dignity, and Helge, who opened up the celebration with a half-sung welcome speech, is able to close the celebration (and the movie) the morning after with a serene and emotional goodbye speech. The masks have dropped, the truth has been revealed, and the father leaves the stage to – we have to presume – take his own life.

The contrast between the sequences

The sophisticated thing about *The Celebration* is the parallel relating of the unusual story and a “natural story”³, recognisable to most of us: the ritual of the family celebration. We know the obligatory speeches, the funny remarks, and the slow running conversation with the woman next to us, the grandfather who no longer remembers anything, and the uncle who drinks too much and is eyeing all the young girls with bad intent. We know the predictable progression with coffee, brandy, and sleepy dancing cheek-to-cheek far into the night.

But in Thomas Vinterberg’s movie, this is turned into a fascinating game of following and breaking rules. The rituals are seriously put to the test, just as the strict rules of Dogma 95 are put to the test in *The Celebration*. Is Christian able to convince the guests of the truth within the narrow framework of a family celebration, and is Vinterberg able to seduce the public within the narrow aesthetics of Dogma?

Form and content, Dogma concept, and Vinterberg’s story all reflect each other. And when Thomas Vinterberg succeeds in this project, it is to a very large degree due to his sense of contrasts which take us by surprise. Not only the contrast between great tragedy and “primitive” Dogma aesthetics, but also the contrast between seriousness and comedy. Where an Ingmar Bergman undoubtedly would have taken the tragedy to its full and final extent, Vinterberg treats the delicate

³ Cf. Thomas Vinterberg and his co-writer Mogens Rukov in their post scriptum to the manuscript, “Om at skrive og forandre”, in: *Festen*, Forlaget Per Kofoed Aps 1998. The notion of “natural story” is developed by Mogens Rukov, who is the daily head of the manuscript department of the Danish Film School.

taboo subjects with warmth, humour, and a youthful energy. Although his short movies *Last Round* (1993), and *The Boy Who Walked Backwards* (1994) deal with a young man sick with cancer, and a boy who loses his older brother, both movies are nonetheless very optimistic. And when Ulrich Thomsen (Christian) with a classic silent movie gesticulation runs away from his father's assistants, he is more reminiscent of a wild Chaplin hobo, who has just kicked a policeman's butt, than of a traumatised victim of incest, for whom we ought to feel sorry.

Finally, the contrast between the individual sequences plays an important role. In the post scriptum to the manuscript, the director and Mogens Rukov write:

We gave ourselves the task that every step should fill out one sequence. And that each sequence should be of its own kind. They should have each their own mood, special rhythm, specific form, focusing on particular places in the reality, in which we were interested. [...]

We rely on this kind of break between sequences not – as one might expect – to halt the progression, but rather to make it dynamic.⁴

Once again, the coup is the parallel progression of the unusual story and the natural story. Every change in mood, rhythm, and aesthetics, is related to a new phase in the ritual celebration, which thus works as a structuring principle for the story and ensures that a break is never left hanging in the air as a made up plot-device.

When the children and the guests in the beginning arrive at the manor accompanied by a jumpy camera and an abrupt cutting, the mood

quite naturally turns ecstatic, as a reunion after a long absence often does. And when the guests in the following sequence are given their rooms and rest before the rigours of the evening, it is just as natural for Vinterberg to turn down the pace, going deeper into the characters, and slowly getting closer to the family trauma which like a bomb is slowly ticking under the harmonious and conventional surface.

Freedom and restraints of Dogma

The “checking in” is the most advanced sequence of the movie. Here Vinterberg contrasts mute horror, shock, and hilarious comedy, here he cuts between three lines of narration (Christian/Pia, Michael/Mette, and Helene/the reception clerk) in a relatively brilliant montage, pressing the Dogma rules to their limit in order to build up an occult, spooky feeling.

In this sequence, the Dogma 95 shows both its strength and its limitation. The strength is shown in the argument about shoes between Michael and Mette, where the flexible, handheld camera creates intimacy while at the same time allowing the actors to improvise without having to think about the position of the camera and chalk marks on the floor. This is where the inspiration from the deceased American independent director John Cassavetes becomes evident: the technology has to adapt itself to the acting, not the other way round, and the director has to seize the small miracles of the moment, as for example when Thomas Bo Larsen (Michael) intuitively drinks a glass of water before “running wild” on his wife.

⁴ *Festen*, op.cit., p. 149.

The limitation of *Dogma 95* can be seen in the ghost scene. Originally, the ghost of Christian's dead twin sister should have walked through the movie – from her placing the goodbye letter in the beginning to the final goodbye to Christian in the last scene – but this idea had to be abandoned. What is left of this idea is the scene in which Christian dreams, and the mysterious surveillance camera, which now and again documents the action in an extreme bird's eye perspective. The camera really makes itself present when it focuses on Helene and the reception clerk, as they enter Linda's old room in the hotel. Does the camera represent the deceased Linda, following the drama from the other side? Does she, just like Laura Palmer in the thematically related *Twin Peaks*, refuse to let go of the living, until justice is done?

Probably. Because there is also something spooky going on in the bathroom in Linda's room, where the camera in a mute setting quite obviously acts as the spirit of the dead one behind a flickering curtain in slow motion (a horror effect repeated later in the movie). This is on the verge of the Vow of Chastity and shows the limitations of the *Dogma* aesthetics, when acting and lines cannot do all the work, and the director is in need of a change of the realistic movie picture into a mental one.⁵ *Dogma 95* and the DV camera⁶ can produce outstanding acting and an authentic feeling of here-and-now, while the horror movie strives to make our everyday categories of time and space unstable, and thus depends on suggestive camera movements,

⁵ Søren Kragh-Jacobsen also had problems with his imaginative UFO sub-plot in *Mifunes Last Song*, *Dogma 3*.

expressive sound effects, background music, lights, a range of blood-red colours...

In other words, there are limits to the Dogma 95. But possibilities as well. And when Thomas Vinterberg sticks to the basic family drama, it is hard to imagine any Hollywood production capable of doing this better.

Translated by Orla Vigsø

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⁶ The DV camera is, strictly speaking, a breach of the Dogma manifesto, as rule number 8 dictates the use of Academy 35mm as a format. For economic reasons, Vinterberg and Lars von Trier were forced to record their movies on video.

On the Dogma movement in general

Dogma and Marketing

Mads Egmont Christensen

The scene is the Berlin Film Festival, February 1999. The place the Scandinavian Films stand in the conference center right in front of the shallow tooth of Gedächtniskirche, and the time is the morning after the very successful in-competition screening of Dogma 3, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's *Mifune's Last Song*. The crowd gathering in front of the desk occupied by Tust Film Sales is rapidly growing. Buyers – sales agents and distributors – from all over the world are battling hopefully to acquire the film for their territory – and the two Danes in charge of the sale, Thomas Mai and Peter Ålbæk Jensen, are obviously and quite openly enjoying their roles as the talk-of-the-town-hard-to-get-to executives of the entire festival.

In the course of the next week one of the most prestigious (and rewarding) sales efforts of a Danish film ever takes place. Even though the actual figures regarding the minimum guarantees aren't official, the interviews given at the time by Peter Ålbæk inform us that only small areas are still remaining unsold, and more importantly, that a very good and advantageous American sale is well on its way to be signed with the distributor Sony Classics. The producers of *Mifune*, Birgitte Hald and Bo Erhardt from Nimbus Film, have accomplished what every European producer only dares to dream of. They have managed – following the success of Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* at the previous year's Cannes festival – to export yet another Danish film

worldwide !

The situation and what had happened before it, is more than anything the result of overall excellent film marketing; of how the branding of a specific family or type of films can be achieved; and of how a carefully constructed set of creative rules of limitation can be utilized not only as a strong foundation for artistic endeavors but also as a true concept for the commercial promoting of an entire range of specific films.

But it is also – as it has developed – about lack of understanding of the business; about the crucial distinctions and interactions between internal marketing towards the various players within the industry and external efforts targeted towards the audience; and about how perspectives of short term financial gain can distort a unique set-up.

Historically the Dogma-project started out as a series of negotiations between Lars von Trier and then minister of culture, Jytte Hilden. Hilden had secured a special public funding based on Trier's ideas on how to do a number of low-budget features. The Film Institute however according to their normal procedures could obviously not handle a support scheme with the name Zentropa written in advance all over it, and the project was left in jeopardy until Denmark's Radio stepped in and, backed by the other Nordic public broadcasters, secured funding for the first five Dogma films. At this time Trier had published the manifesto and attention and interest had been building for quite some time.

It was undoubtedly the extreme creativity of the public relations

efforts of Lars von Trier and Peter Ålbæk Jensen that made way for the financing of the initial Dogma project. As it had been the case a couple of years earlier, when their production company Zentropa was launched. The two have jointly better than any understood that the best way to open up for the quintessential public funding – the key to European production – is to win the interest of the press. Especially to find a place – one could say any place – within the general focus of those journalists who cover film and media. In the European situation every national film of any merit – even regarded as part of a business; of belonging to a corporate venture – is still critically observed as art, and that attitude is governed by the press. To have the press working for you is as good a launching for any project as you can get.

Zentropa has cleverly managed to position itself as a company where the artistic endeavors are the core of the activities. They are building an impression of the small idealistic outfit struggling against the financially much stronger and larger traditionalist companies – both on a national level and in the wake of the personal success of Trier with *Europa*, *Breaking the Waves* and latest *Dancer in the Dark* also internationally. This central public relations element – of the creative underdog – has led to an unsurpassed popularity with the funding bodies. Not only in Denmark but as a matter of fact all over Europe.

Even though the financing of the Dogma project may have been the result of this effective but rather traditionally subsidy orientated Zentropa-way-of-working, it was immediately clear to everybody that the concept itself was far more interesting. Especially when seen as a

very appropriate comment on the overall non-European dominance in the world film marketplace. The wonderfully timed and eloquently written provocation of defining the scope of the low-budget films in question and adding a number of both technical and creative limitations is a result of the remarkable film-theoretical approach of Lars von Trier. Back to true filmmaking. Where the aesthetics of the blockbuster films of the day have underpinned the fact that the medium most certainly has the ability to create new-never-seen-before reality, the limited nature of the Dogma techniques enhances quite another sense of the *real* reality. Our own world of social interaction as it is. It's like being there – as Thomas Vinterberg must be very aware of when he lets his audience watch almost 48 frames of pitch-black film in a particular scene in *Festen*.

The implications of the rules upon the artistic outcome of the films have been discussed – and are undoubtedly the topic for much of the discussion in this issue of *p.o.v.* – but it is clear that as a jointly artistic and commercial starting point for a vertically integrated understanding of the entire production process, Dogma works wonderfully well. The sum of limitations becomes an effective platform for building the simple expression that is at the very core of communicating on film. During a debate on Dogma which was arranged by the London Film Festival, questions were constantly being asked about the impact of the rules upon almost every aspect of filmmaking. At a certain point Thomas Vinterberg felt inclined to put an end to the arguing and said something like: I'll tell you what Dogma is about. It is about that the five of us met one evening every week for almost a

year with the one purpose of discussing what our films were all about. That was the wonderful thing – we talked our films into existence.

But the nature and exposition of the manifesto was also constructed as something that could be utilized as a means of “selling” the films once they were made. What was being cleverly constructed was a so called *branding* of the Dogma concept. Branding is the naming of a certain genre or type of films, which share similarities, that can be commonly referred to. For instance a *Disney-film* or a *James Bond-movie*. To place oneself as a producer in a position where you are able to brand your product is actually very rare. It often takes a lot of time and a great number of successful films. But here it was achieved with stunning originality almost overnight.

The selling – or marketing – of a given film takes place a number of times during the production process, and as we have seen in connection with the selling of the Dogma project to the financiers the successful handling of the film is from the very beginning a result of how the balance between the entire range of artistic and commercial elements is presented.

This was also the case when the two first finished Dogma films *Idioterne* and *Festen* should be “sold” to the Cannes Film festival in 1998. Over the past ten to fifteen years the festival circuit has become a parallel method of film distribution and even though eighty-five percent of films shown at film festivals never reach commercial screens, it is obviously very prestigious to be in competition. And of course on top of that it might very well be – depending on your having

the right film at the right festival and your ability to tell about it in the right way – that you might end up in that fifteen percent category.

It almost certainly helped Lars von Trier that he and festival director Gilles Jacob have a very close relationship. But Jacob must also have realized that where *Idioterne* – with its famous controversial director at the helm – was a somewhat difficult film, the other Dogma entry, *Festen* – with its relatively unknown newcomer – was much more accessible to a wider audience. A situation that made the Dogma concept the central element in the decision to admit both films to the main competition.

The public relations strategy and the marketing campaign up to and towards the festival was very well handled by the producers of the two films. *Idioterne* was a Zentropa production, whereas *Festen* was produced by Nimbus Film, an affiliate company headed by Birgitte Hald and Bo Erhardt, who had been associated with Thomas Vinterberg since they all graduated from the Danish Film School. Jointly the companies contacted Swiss sales agent, Christa Saredi, who accepted to take charge of the foreign sales of *Festen*.

The decision to take on board a professional sales agent at this early stage in a film's lifetime was a corporate move of excellence and reflects the rather outstanding level of creativity of Danish film in general. Following the success of Bille August and others in the early nineties in the realm of realism on the screen, the impact of von Trier's expressionism was now taking over and effectively enhancing the notion of Denmark as a place where things were really happening in

the cinema. And Dogma obviously had already played an integral part in this.

Christa Saredi was aware of the extraordinary possibilities of striking worthwhile deals with distributors for *Festen* – the next very important “sale” in the film production process – because she knew that the film’s ability to perform well in the commercial marketplace would be backed by the discussions and the buzz following the screening of Lars von Trier’s film. *Idioterne* – Dogma I – was scheduled to be screened in competition a couple of days prior to Thomas Vinterberg’s Dogma II film. In this way von Trier’s imaginative and practical concept accompanied by the realization in his own work was turned into a strong marketing fundament for the supposed critical acclaim of Vinterberg’s utilization of the principles. The result was appropriate world wide sales for both films. *Idioterne* went – as was to be expected – primarily to the art-house circuit, whereas *Festen* was sold to distributors equipped to handle cross-over products, i.e. low budget films that do have potential to perform successfully in the commercial marketplace.

This distinction is crucial to the philosophy of film sales and marketing. As a sales agent you need to be sure that the product you are pricing and selling to a distributor will also work effectively at the last “sale” in this back-end chain of distribution, marketing and exhibition. The “sale” of the film (from the exhibitor) to the audience. This is also the point where all the elements within the entire marketing campaign, which hopefully has accompanied the film all through preproduction, production, postproduction and distribution

shall prove their efficiency towards the general public. Needless to say marketing costs are sky high and a distributor – or even an exhibitor – who ends up with a film that nobody wants to see and that cannot be marketed effectively is far more likely to turn away from the risky cross-over films and turn towards the top-trimmed product that he can acquire from the major US companies. And which an average of 87 % of the European cinema-goers prefer – let alone the fact that it is almost impossible to get any European film into the US market.

In this respect the targeted, distinctive and well-prepared sales of the two first Dogma films at the Cannes Film Festival and in the period that followed were extremely well handled – and maybe even more importantly they left the concept intact. Dogma was indeed very much alive and kicking as both films within their respective market segments were brought to the right screens and audiences all over the world.

Proof of this could be detected by everyone who was present before, during and after the screening of “Mifune” in Berlin. The buzz was fantastic, expectations high as rumors of how Søren Kragh-Jacobsen’s humanism had added something special to this third Dogma production. However Saredi World Sales was not going to handle the film. Nimbus had made an agreement with Zentropa’s sales company, Trust Film Sales, and one could get the idea that the representatives of this fairly new outfit were just as overwhelmed by the cheering following the screening as everyone else.

Seen from a strictly business orientated point of view the sales

couldn't have gone any better. In the confusion and extremely competitive atmosphere the highest bidders would get the deal. Maybe it would have taken extreme professionalism to consider the long term aspects and the nurturing of relations to a number of friendly players in the overall marketplace, but the conclusion is, that many distributors from a number of territories all over the world later discovered that they had bought a film with which they were not even able to recoup their down payment.

Everybody – sellers and buyers alike – made the mistake of confusing the internal marketing elements and the specific arguments which needed to be applied in the sale between the agent and the distributor, with the potential of the external marketing. It was in other words impossible for the distributors locally to recreate the sensation that they had experienced at the market in Berlin, and have that work for their audiences.

The results of the hit-and-run strategy that hopefully inadvertently and unconsciously was brought forward in the handling of *Mifune*, which by the way probably would have made wonderful business at the box-office, had realistic measures been added in a well-prepared sales and marketing strategy, have especially victimized Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive*. Even in spite of critical acclaim in connection with its opening in Cannes this year in *Un Certain Regard*, the producers (and investors) are still struggling to make an art-house distribution deal, and it has long ago been decided not to label the film a Dogma production as part of the marketing.

The way that Dogma – even considering the prestigious sales results – both as a concept for artistic guidelines and as a marketing vehicle was weakened in the months after the Berlin Film Festival is a scary example of how intricate – and integrated – the international movie business really is. It is a lesson of how corporate filmmaking, from idea to final audience consumption, is a much more collaborative effort than we are led to believe in our part of the world, where the subsidy driven approach has resulted in a joint – and very dangerous – understanding of the production process culminating and ending with the opening of the film. Film sales, distribution and marketing are areas we are just approaching, and maybe we need to respect the expertise, that our ideas can attract, as a first careful step towards building that European industry, which all European filmmakers so desperately want and are preparing for in our institutions, in our development efforts and in the launching of our productions – and that some of us may accidentally think is already here.

Paving the way for *Idioterne* and for the buzz in Berlin – because the balance between the second last sale – that of the sales agent to the distributor – is equivalent to the last sale – that of the exhibitor to the audience.

Distribution is the key to building an industry in each of the European countries – and with a bad relationship between producers and distributors this shall never happen.

Dogma died in Berlin with the prestigious sales efforts.

Authentic Illusions – The Aesthetics of Dogma 95

Ove Christensen

The nakedness and simplicity of Dogma has put us back in touch with the essentials of filmmaking.

Anthony Dod Mantle

In November 1999 the Polish director Roman Polanski visited the National Film School of Denmark. During his stay he confirmed that he knew of Dogma 95 but when asked if he would make a film in accordance with its principles, he answered: “Everybody makes them now. My 6-year-old daughter does it all the time when she is running around with her digital video camera.”¹

Polanski’s answer sounds like a typical reaction to abstract art: ‘Even a child could paint that’.² But as is the case with abstract art, it would be a mistake to confuse the artifact with the rules governing its production, even if the resulting product suggests a lack of conventional craftsmanship. There is a gap between poetics and works of art. One can not judge say a Dogma film on the basis of the

¹ Cf. *Dagbladet Information* 1999 November 19th, p. 9

² It is interesting to note that the *Dogme Manifesto* (“Dogme 95”) expresses a similar rejection of a too easy access to filmmaking: “Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratisation of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies.” See the Manifesto: *Dogme 95* at www.dogme95.dk. The reaction is of the kind that rejects the possibility of art based on technological innovation: A “Since the electric guitar music has died”-kind of response.

Manifesto and *The Vow of Chastity*. These two texts present a poetics of Dogma filmmaking. However, the films made in accordance with the principles of Dogma 95 have to be regarded as individual films.

In his somewhat condescending attitude towards the aesthetic principles of Dogma 95, Polanski, however, correctly pinpoints the importance for Dogma 95 of a kind of desired amateurism. By renouncing the professional refinements of filmmaking, the brotherhood of Dogma 95 tries to minimize the distance between the filmed and the finished film. They want to rediscover a sincerity of cinema. If he had to describe the real purpose of the concept of Dogma 95, Lars von Trier says, it would be as a search for genuineness/sincerity (Danish: 'ægthed').³ The technical restrictions presented in *The Vow of Chastity* are the means to achieve a kind of authenticity.

In what respect a film can be authentic is, however, the crucial question. To understand the idea of Dogma 95, it is important to discuss the concept of authenticity in relation to cinema. Here the discussion will only deal with the principles behind Dogma 95 and will not touch upon the films made under the auspices of Dogma 95.

In the history of cinema, the claim of authenticity has been made on at least three different levels, implying three different meanings of Realism. In respect to cinema as representation, authenticity and hence the degree of realism involves an *epistemological level*. The truth is

placed in the external world and the task of the medium is to represent it. The conventional mode of (filmic) storytelling is firstly dependent on the credibility of its characters, locations, and causality etc and secondly on the subordination of the telling in itself to the content of the story told. The authenticity of conventional storytelling is related to the collaboration of *syuzhet*, style and *fabula* on a *formal level*. The truth is contained within the film's world (of make-believe) and the task is to give access to this world. If the film's emphasis is only indirectly or symbolically related to a defined reality and hence is based on an idea, authenticity is measured on a *thematic level*.⁴ The truth is an apprehension or an opinion that is not directly accessible, so the task is to convince the spectator, who has to see the truth for him- or herself. The third could also be described as an *ideological level* in that it deals with and argues in favor of certain values and beliefs. These three levels are in no way exclusive and there are possibly more of them.

The main goal of *Dogma 95* is to achieve a purification of film language by avoiding a lot of otherwise well-established technical devices since these are seen as creating an undesirable filter between the profilmic setting and the actual film. Technical manipulations of a film are rejected as cosmetics that hide the true images or the truth of the film. Technical manipulations disrupt the filmed subject and turn it into harmless pieces of decor or easy entertainment. At least

³ Cf. Lars von Trier *Idioterne*, p. 238. I quote from von Trier's diary of the filming of *The Idiots*. The diary is printed in the manuscript.

⁴ Here thematic includes all so-called deep structures that are not visible and hence not directly depictable.

apparently, the *Dogma Manifesto* and *The Vow of Chastity* express a longing for a kind of *cinéma vérité*, films without the traditional trickery of filmic illusions.

Technically generated illusions are the target of Dogma 95 in its rescue action for the cinema. The *Manifesto* of Dogma 95 represents a forthright confrontation with the cinema of illusion: "To DOGMA 95 the movie is not illusion! Today a technological storm is raging of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind." The cinema proper is something that has to do not with illusions but with truth. But it is not always easy to distinguish between illusion and truth. And this difficulty is even greater in relation to aesthetic artifacts in that they only possess an at best indirect reference to (the representation of) reality or their own subject matter. Film language is not only, and not even primarily, a matter of communicative assertions concerning a state of affairs. Instead, film has to be seen as an expressive interpretation of reality in its broadest sense. Even a representation has to be regarded as an interpretation. But if this is the case what does 'truth' then mean and what is meant by illusion?

By the rejection of illusions, Dogma 95 apparently draws on the Bazinian idea of the truthfulness of cinematic representation. Discussing film directors, André Bazin makes his well-known distinction "...between two broad and opposing trends: those

directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality. By 'image' I here mean, very broadly speaking, everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented."⁵ That nothing be added to the object represented is also the desired result of the principles of Dogma 95.

The idea of the photographic image and consequently the cinema as a mirror of reality goes back a long time in history. The idea was already foreshadowed with Daguerre's notion of photography as the double of nature, which for that matter was an echo of the Renaissance where Alberti claimed that through representation with 'natural perspective' (*perspectiva artificialis*) the image became a window on to the world.⁶

The logical contradictions within *cinéma vérité* in relation to fiction films are, however, also inherent in Dogma 95. The badly produced images of the hand-held camera and insufficient lighting make use of a documentary style. But the filmed subject is in no way presented as reality in itself. According to *The Vow of Chastity*, the subjects of Dogma films are presumed to be fictitious and there is no intention to lure the audience to believe otherwise. Where does this dichotomy between the real and the fictitious place the desired authenticity of Dogma 95? If the documentary style is nothing but a trick, it approaches the old avant-garde's self-conscious use of styles and

⁵ André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," *What Is Cinema?* p. 24.

⁶ The conception of the photographic image as a window on to the world has been widespread but it has also been widely disputed. Although the argument is made more complex André Bazin repeats the idea in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema*.

genres. But such an approach of alienation does not go together with the search for sincerity and authenticity. And it is also obvious that *Dogma 95* is a rejection of a post-modernist stance, favoring an attitude of irony and playfulness, which takes nothing seriously.

Reading the *Dogma Manifesto* it becomes evident that filmic techniques are regarded as the main obstacles to the creation of genuine films. Technical devices are identified as cosmetics that create illusions. This is not only a problem for the film as representation but also as an art form. The illusions disregard the film as art and make film a matter of the sheer communication of feelings and sensations. The problem is not emotions and sensations as such. The problem is that the emotions communicated are false in respect to the stories told, since they are generated by trickery and are therefore neither intrinsic to the film itself nor to the characters. Sensations are regarded as superficialities creating hollow entertainment, in no way affecting the spectator intellectually. This is the basic diagnosis of contemporary film as I interpret *The Vow of Chastity* and the *Manifesto*. According to the brotherhood of *Dogma 95*, a new avant-garde is necessary to counter the commercialized film or “‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today” as it says in the *Manifesto*.

The brotherhood of *Dogma* is fighting the film heretics who worship technology and thus abandon the true art of film. Filmmakers have given in to the craftsmanship of filmic illusionism. Refraining from good taste and aesthetic considerations, the directors complying with *Dogma 95* want to return to the great masters of cinema and “force the

truth out of [...] characters and settings” to quote from *The Vow of Chastity*. This quotation locates the truth in the profilmic and the film’s task is to transfer this truth to the film. Situating the truth outside the actual film is the plausible reason for refraining from technical improvements of the depicted.

To counter technological enslavement, Dogma 95 demands a minimized aesthetic if the latter means improvements to the look of the film made in postproduction or on the set. The images are not supposed to be the main attraction in a film but are to be regarded as necessary means to reach the true film that is its content. Here one notices the affinity with the credo of Realism in the conventional Hollywood aesthetic as described by David Bordwell.⁷ Style is nothing in itself but only a vehicle for the story told. A too obvious style is regarded as an obstacle to the reception of the film.

But Dogma 95 is of course not a repetition of Hollywood Realism with its demand for relatively invisible editing allowing only the content to be dominant. But the rejection of the importance of the images is for various reasons found in the conventions of Hollywood and of Dogma 95. Well-composed pictures guarantee that the audience will not be attracted to them in that they do not disturb normal reception.

But by its minimized aesthetic and even more so by the insistence on hand-held camera, Dogma 95 ensures that the audience is made aware of the film as an artifact and thereby of the implied mise-en-scene and

filming. Contrary to the Hollywood convention, the style of Dogma 95 is very visible in that it precisely disappoints audience expectations and prevents automatized reception. In short, the Dogma principles give the films a kind of self-awareness by creating a minimal meta-filmic effect. This effect implies an alienation that seems to be contrary to the desired result. By the same token the hand-held camera together with badly composed images, shaky pictures and the like are also signs of the documentary, suggesting that the filmed subject exists independently of the filming. The principles of Dogma 95 indicate formal realism, thematic realism and the illusion of semiotic realism together with the conventional avant-garde's mistrust of art as the representation of a given reality. The contradictions haunt the project as they have haunted other attempts at mediated immediacy.

The search for a more ascetic aesthetics of film is not something unique to the brotherhood of Dogma 95 but has to be seen in relation to a much wider tendency within cinema as well as contemporary culture as such. The ugly and apparently amateurish look has for instance been a trend within advertising at least since the 80s. Punk aesthetics has had a great impact for the last twenty years. In television an increasing number of programs consist of docu-soaps, video diaries, home videos, reality shows, and the like which seem to be an attempt to side-track the professionals and give the screen to 'ordinary people'. The applied aesthetics seems to privilege the amateurish 'made-on-the-cheap' look.

⁷ Cf. for example David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp.156-204.

The prerequisite of a minimal aesthetics makes Dogma 95 the last in a long line. In Denmark as well as internationally ugly cinema has received increased attention: films that do not consist of well-produced (focused, well-lit, harmoniously composed) images. Dogma 95 has forerunners throughout the whole history of cinema not only in cinema's recent history. Just to mention a few recent examples, we find Harmony Korine who in his film *Gummo* (1997) uses a home video kind of style.⁸ Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) by Myrick and Sanchez are other films that in different ways exploit the illusion of truthfulness by an absolute minimum of aesthetic refinement. The Danish film by Jonas Elmer, *Let's Get Lost* (1998), is an excellent example of the use of a documentary style. And one can think for instance of the success Jim Jarmusch achieved with his low-budget film *Stranger Than Paradise* from 1984.

The history of narrative cinema is rich in examples of the search for truthfulness. Cassavetes' and Warhol's films from the 60s and 70s are very diverse forerunners to a minimal cinematic aesthetics. But the traces go even further back. The cinema of illusion has been countered ever since its birth. Searchers for a cinema of the real as opposed to a cinema of illusion find prominent and obvious examples in the Italian Neo-realism from the 50s and in Vertov's early manifestos of the 20s.⁹

⁸ Korine's film *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) has been certified as a film in compliance with Dogme 95.

⁹ Cf. Peter Schepelern: 'Filmen ifølge Dogme' [The movie according to Dogma], pp. 12-16.

These examples of different filmmakers and genres which share some features with Dogma 95 are only a few and each one relates differently to Dogma 95. They are mentioned merely to suggest that the Dogma *Manifesto* hardly represents something shockingly new.

But if the very idea of authenticity is self-contradictory and not even new, what do we then make of the whole idea of Dogma 95?

First of all it appears that Dogma 95 is a very unclear statement. The object of criticism is not at all evident. The target is something called the cosmetics of film. But filmmaking will always imply the use of technology and what takes place before the camera is also a matter of technique (acting, directing, choice of settings, colors, etc.). And the fact that all kinds of techniques can be used for different purposes (art, entertainment, descriptive depiction) applies to mise-en-scene as well as post-production. According to Dogma 95 some techniques are allowed and some are not. Abandoning good taste, however, does not mean a lack of aesthetics. Bad taste arouses an aesthetic reflectivity and asserts something about the state of the arts. But it is not the applied techniques that prevent a film from being a work of art or a sincere work of authenticity. Dogma 95 does not even claim to be the only way of making films but is merely regarded as one alternative possibility. This undermines the critique of the cosmeticizing effect of technology.

Dogma 95 is very unclear and abstract in its criticism of contemporary cinema and the development of cinema since 1960. But it does not formulate a positive alternative either. The *Manifesto* and *The Vow of*

Chastity do not qualify as a poetics of filmmaking and the films made in compliance with the rules and regulations confirm this. Having seen the three films finished under Dogma's Ten Commandments (*The Celebration* (1998), *The Idiots* (1998), and *Mifune's Last Song* (1999)) it is difficult if not impossible to consider Dogma 95 to be a common poetics.

The rules are more a way for each of the directors to rethink their own filmmaking and not least of drawing attention to the participating director's films. Most important, Dogma 95 is a way of emphasizing the obligation of filmmakers to rethink the language of cinema. Moreover Dogma 95 has drawn international attention to Danish film and in particular the associates of Dogma 95, thus improving the possibilities of maintaining the role of Danish film in a world dominated by American cinema. Even if Dogma 95 may seem to be *much ado about nothing*, its impact on public awareness of cinema and its implied aesthetics has been great. It has encouraged reflection on the status of cinema and on film as an art form.

But insisting on rules forbidding technical interference with the image is inconsistent, insofar as the brotherhood of Dogma 95 does make fiction films. The director uses many conventional techniques in arranging the events and actors before the camera. What is filmed is by no means true to reality proper. Films are illusions but they might be authentic illusions revealing a truth bigger than life – or just a game of make-believe. The oscillation between these two positions is what counts and Dogma 95 contributes with its insistence on true stories.

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The press and DOGMA 95

Søren Kolstrup

Introduction: the manifesto

When the **DOGMA 95** manifesto was published on March 13th 1995, the press reacted promptly and in different ways. In fact the manifesto had at least three features that would attract the press and make it discuss the formulas it contained: the title "*Kyskhedsløftet*" (The Vow of Chastity), the notion of DOGMA (that is, "dogma") with its religious connotations and, of course, the number ten referring to the Ten Commandments. The whole concept developed a certain catholic aura in the press during 1995. To this we should add that in current Danish, the word "Dogma" has a negative sense: it implies false ideas or a stereotype. Once again Trier had succeeded in provoking public opinion. The result was that, in the first year after the publication of DOGMA 95, the newspapers were somewhat bewildered. The Manifesto's Vow of Chastity was treated as often as four times in the newspaper *Politiken*. Of course every one knew that it was a metaphor, but what were the implications of the metaphor? The catholic and clerical aura of Lars von Trier made the newspapers uneasy!

The corpus and the sampling

This text is based on articles from *Politiken* (108) and *Ekstrabladet* (45). The articles were all taken from *Politiken's* database Polinfo and they all contain the words "film" and "Dogma" (in the sense of DOGMA 95).

This does not mean that the corpus is exhaustive in the case of articles on Vinterberg or Trier. In fact many articles about their films do not contain the word "Dogma"; in May – June 1998 there are several articles related to the Cannes Festival with no mention of the word "Dogma". On the other hand, only texts containing the words "film" and "Dogma" could be of certain interest for this issue of *p.o.v.*! From 1995 to June 1999 *Ekstrabladet* has 45 articles and *Politiken* 108. I have chosen summer 1999 as the limit. At that point, both the Berlin Festival (where *Mifunes sidste sang* or *The Last Song of Mifune* was awarded the "Silver Bear") and the Cannes Festival 1999 have finished.

Newspapers write about events. How does the press treat DOGMA 95, a subject which was, at least at first, rather far from being an event? How (that is, under what circumstances) could a manifesto be a "true" event? How (under what circumstances) can the production of a film be an event? How (under which circumstances) can a film be an event? How does the press play a role as distributor of cultural information? Is it at all concerned about cultural information?

Ekstrabladet and *Politiken* have been chosen because they represent two very different kinds of morning papers. The first is a popular newspaper, while *Politiken* is a big, national newspaper with more than hundred years of cultural information tradition. I have refrained from including the other kinds of newspapers, such as the one or two local newspapers or any of the small "parish magazines" in Copenhagen (*Information, Kristelig Dagblad, Aktuelt*).

Some simple questions have been addressed to each article in the two papers.

Which genre of article is used? Does it treat the notion of “Dogma” or the “film” or does it only mention one of them? Are the technical or the artistic aspects of the film (production) treated or mentioned? Are the economical aspects of the film (production) treated or mentioned? To what extent do historical aspects play a role? Does the text have a general nationalist approach?

Does the text have a general personal approach (human interest)? To this last question we might add two related questions. Is the film director treated, not as a director, but as an interesting private person? Is one of the actors treated, not as an actor, but as an interesting private person? Does the text have other approaches? However, I admit that the difference between “*mentioning*” and “*treating*” is in many cases subject to fluctuation!

The use of genres

	EB	in %	Pol	in %
News and short notices	16	35.6	35	32.4
Reports	13	28.9	15	13.9
Comments and reviews	4	8.9	26	24.1
Interviews	3	6.7	16	14.8
Fictional genres	3	6.7	2	1.9
Other genres	6	13.3	14	13.0
Total number of texts	45	100.1	108	100.1

Figure I: The distribution of journalistic genres

The choice of genres is not accidental; it reflects the interests and the approaches of the newspapers to the subject "DOGMA". Simple news and factual information have almost the same weight for the two papers, but the journalistic stories have an enormous importance for *Ekstrabladet*. In their reports the reader is taken by the hand and introduced by the paper to the strange world of the directors. What are they like? What do they do? How do they live? How was life in Cannes 1998 for the Danes? Etc., etc.

Commentary constitutes the genre of analysis and reflection. No wonder *Politiken* has three times as much as the popular paper, since the analysis of the "Dogma" concept can only be treated in comments and related genres. It might seem strange that *Ekstrabladet* has so few interviews, but it should be remembered that an interview, in the proper sense of the word, demands a very thorough preparation and a rather large knowledge of the subject matter, both on the part of the journalist and the reader. What happens is that *Ekstrabladet's* reports are filled up with short (factual) interviews, which fit into the human interest stories best expressed within reports.

The conclusion is that *Ekstrabladet* uses, in the case of "DOGMA", the same genres as it uses for telling news, which means that *Ekstrabladet* is (only) interested in "DOGMA" inasmuch as the "Dogma" phenomenon can be presented as news. *Politiken* is interested in "Dogma" as principle and as film.

The concept of “Dogma” and the “films” as such

The words “Dogma” and “film” are always represented in the texts, but their use is very different from text to text. You may, albeit with some difficulty and with some very loose criteria, divide the texts into two groups: the ones which treat or discuss the concept or the films (or both) and those which merely mention “Dogma”. In 1995 *Politiken* does discuss the notion and later, especially in 1998 and ‘99 this newspaper reviews the film. *Ekstrabladet* does not even mention DOGMA 95 until the end of the year. (The corpus has only one article from this year, the 20th December.) Later *Ekstrabladet* presents some reviews of the film (abstracts of the content, never an analysis). Especially after 1998 “DOGMA” appears as a reference, or a back-

Newspaper	Year	Treated	Mentioned
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	1	13
	1998	11	9
	1999	6	5
	Total number	17	28
	In percent	37.8	62.2
Politiken	1995	8	3
	1996	2	7
	1997	6	8
	1998	20	19
	1999	14	21
	Total number	50	58
	In percent	46.3	53.7

Figure II: “Dogma” and “films” treated or mentioned

ground theme occurring in a discussion about films (notably cheap films!) other than “Dogma” films. This is very clear in *Politiken*. The most thorough article in *Politiken* about DOGMA is Mogens Rukov’s

commentary on DOGMA (23rd March 1995) and in the same issue Preben Hornung's ironic article where the 7th commandment is extended in such a way that it orders the directors to obey the classical dramatic units of time, space and action!

Artistic or technical aspects of the films or of the film production

40% of the articles in *Ekstrabladet* and 36.1% of those in *Politiken* present or mention the artistic and/or the technical aspects of the film (production).

Newspaper	Year	Treated	Mentioned
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	1	4
	1998	6	5
	1999	1	1
	Total number	8	10
	In percent	40.0	
Politiken	1995	7	
	1996	1	
	1997	1	1
	1998	5	5
	1999	9	6
	Total number	23	12
	In percent	32.4	

Figure III: Articles treating or mentioning the artistic and/or the technical aspects of film (production)

It is very difficult to evaluate such small numbers, but two things are certain: In the beginning (1995), *Politiken* writes about the production principles that are the (theoretical) consequences of the "Dogma" principles, and in 1998 and 1999 *Politiken* writes about the production

aspects of the films. *Ekstrabladet* is very keen to do the same in 1998, the year of Vinterberg's triumph. Just why *Ekstrabladet* and *Politiken* diverge in 1999 is not clear to me!

The economic aspects

The economic aspects are rather few; the heavy articles covering the economics of film production are not concerned about DOGMA. Late 1997 *Politiken* had a very thorough series of articles about the economy and the administration of Zentropa. None of these articles figure in the corpus. In the case of both *Politiken* and *Ekstrabladet*, the economical aspects pop up in the news articles at the time when Jytte Hilden did not succeed in giving 15 millions of Danish crowns to the DOGMA project and when

Newspaper	Year	Treated	Mentioned
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	5	
	1998	1	
	1999		
	Total number	6	1
	In percent	15.5	
Politiken	1995	2	
	1996	4	
	1997	3	2
	1998	1	2
	1999	3	1
	Total number	13	5
	In percent	16.7	

Figure IV: Articles treating or mentioning the economic aspects

Bjørn Erichsen, director of DR television, saved the project. The actions of these two persons, or better personalities, constitute genuine events for press reporting.

Historical aspects

Many news articles contain a historical dimension, the reader is updated or gets a reminder. This historical update is one of van Dijks superstructure categories. Here the two newspapers diverge. *Ekstrabladet* seems to feel the need for updating the readers who may not have a very extended knowledge of the history of DOGMA. The history category was a necessity in the articles from Cannes or in the articles from 1997 about the production of the first two films.

Newspaper	Year	Treated	Mentioned
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	7	5
	1998	5	3
	1999		2
	Total number	12	10
	In percent	48.9	
Politiken	1995		
	1996		2
	1997	4	1
	1998	8	
	1999	2	5
	Total number	14	8
	In percent	20.4	

Figure V: Articles treating or mentioning historical aspects

The national approach

The national approach can be expressed in many ways; one single word may start a whole chain of national, or even nationalistic, associations. Here puns or jokes are common in this register, such as “Dogmevang” – which is of course a transformation of “Dannevang” (old poetic or humorous variant of Denmark). Thus it implies that “Dogma” is Danish, a part of the national splendor, but even worse, DOGMA means small, cheap, but intelligent film production. DOGMA is well known throughout the world, which fits too well into the national Danish syndrome. “How can you be the best even if you are small?” and “We are the best, because...” In a way it is astonishing that the national approach is not used so much in the articles, but it is not astonishing that the sensationalist and nationalist *Ekstrabladet* has more nationalistic approaches than has *Politiken*.

Newspaper	Year	Dominant	Marginal
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	1	1
	1998	3	3
	1999	6	
	Total number	10	4
	In percent	31.1	
Politiken	1995	2	
	1996	1	
	1997		
	1998		2
	1999	4	
	Total number	7	2
	In percent	8.3	

Figure VI: Distribution of dominant and marginal nationalistic approaches

On the whole, both *Ekstrabladet* and *Politiken* have more references to nation in 1999 than in 1998. At first this might be surprising. Vinterberg's triumph in Cannes is, whatever our opinions about the Cannes and Berlin festivals might be, a bigger media event than Søren Kragh Jakobsen's prize in Berlin. Nevertheless "the conquest of Cannes" seems to us to be nonsense, whereas the "conquest of Berlin" makes dramatic sense, since we are still looking for revenge on the Germans: the conquest of Berlin is furthered by "First we take Manhattan, then we..." So the year 1999 brought us the expression "Dogme über alles"!

The nationalist approach of *Ekstrabladet* takes various paths, but mostly by using expressions that look very much like the ones used in articles (reports) on sport: "This is one of these evenings where it feels good to be a Dane in Cannes" (*Ekstrabladet* 19.05.1998).

The whole national syndrome evident in the article from 13.02.1999. Here the "cheap, small Danish love story" (Søren Kragh Jakobsen's film *Mifune's Last Stand*) is opposed to the "big boys" (the big American films), "against these giants stands the Danish love film from Lolland" (a very flat island in the southern part of Denmark), "and against the American world stars stands a group of Danish film makers and actors who, the day before, looked pretty Danish in the lobby of the luxurious hotel Intercontinental". (So we don't look rich and international?). DOGMA has been absorbed by *Ekstrabladet's* national discourse, that relies in many ways on Danish texts and ideologies from the middle of the 19th Century!

The personal touch, the human interest

For years, Lars von Trier has been an enigmatic person, who perfectly knows how to manage his own phobias, while his administrative director Peter Aalbæk Jensen knows how to use the press even better. The two form a classic couple; one is small, introverted, wired, the other is fat, brash, extrovert and smokes big cigars. Vinterberg looks like a film star. So for years everything has been prepared for the press. The good stories are already there and *Ekstrabladet* is delighted! Why waste your time on research about specific film procedures (boring stuff and stories), when the persons Trier and Aalbæk furnish the good anecdotes? The story about Trier's misfortune when he arrives at the hotel in Cannes (1998). (The hotel rejects a guest who arrives in a motor caravan.) We get the endless descriptions from Aalbæk, who gives them more weight than the subject about which the administrator is interviewed.

Newspaper	Year	Dominant	Marginal
Ekstrabladet	1995 - 1997	11	2
	1998	14	
	1999	6	1
	Total number	31	3
	In percent	75.5	
Politiken	1995	1	
	1996	3	
	1997	2	1
	1998	3	
	1999	3	4
	Total number	12	5
	In percent	15.7	

Figure VII: Distribution of dominant and marginal personal approaches

The 28th April 1996 issue of *Ekstrabladet* has an article on Lars von Trier in honor of his 40th birthday. The article begins by presenting some aspects of Trier's character. Then it continues: "These are only some of the points of the long list of facts about Trier. But instead of getting mixed up in a long, boring intellectual analysis of this man, we will ask some people, who have worked with Trier to express their opinion about the man." There follows a mosaic of anecdotal descriptions.

As for Aalbæk, his cigars and his facial and other expressions are common in *Ekstrabladet*. In a newspaper article from the 11th February 1997 Aalbæk is interviewed by telephone about the 15 million crowns project: "You can almost hear both his smile and his cigar through the telephone when he continues...", and on the third of June, Aalbæk "sighs heavily".

Thus *Politiken* and *Ekstrabladet* diverge fundamentally at this point. Journalism is human interest for *Ekstrabladet*. *Politiken* is far behind in this respect, and most of the human interest stuff is confined to the interviews, a genre that combines human interest with subject matter information.

This tendency is confirmed if we look at the articles treating the film directors or the actors. *Ekstrabladet* has 24 articles (53.3% of all articles) where the director appears also as a person (and not only as director of the film). *Politiken* has only 27 articles of this kind, 25% of all articles. As for the actors of the films being treated as persons (with or without their role as actors), *Ekstrabladet* has 12 articles (26.7%) and *Politiken* 10 articles (9.3%).

Conclusion

As for the central question, “What was DOGMA 95 like and how were the films treated?”, the answer is that *Politiken* gives us to some extent reliable information and useful analyses about both. *Ekstrabladet* is not interested in DOGMA 95 as such and, as for the films, *Ekstrabladet* gives us mostly a résumé. As we have seen, *Ekstrabladet* dislikes intellectual analyses because they are boring.

As for the technical or the artistic aspects of the film (production), it is difficult to conclude. As we have seen *Politiken* describes in the beginning the technical and artistic/aesthetic aspects of DOGMA 95. Later both newspapers present articles describing the production of all three films.

Ekstrabladet is clearly distinct from *Politiken* in its emphasis of the human interest story that takes over (often in the shape of Peter Aalbæk) when the factual information on the “film” and DOGMA 95 does not fit into *Ekstrabladet*’s image of the interests of its readers.

DOGMA 95 does not escape the nationalist temptation, especially in *Ekstrabladet*. The story about how the little cheap/poor Danish film was able to beat the international or the Hollywood monsters underlies several articles. *Ekstrabladet* uses the same language that it used in June 1992 when Denmark became European champion of soccer.

Should we conclude that almost all of the 153 articles are a failure and that the press is unable to fulfil its functions, because especially *Ekstrabladet* is not very keen on cultural information? Not at all. Trier

and Vinterberg made a manifesto in order to clear the ground for a new film production, the press did spread the message, and the whole nation (and some people in foreign countries) listened. Even the readers of *Ekstrabladet*, those who dislike intellectual analyses, learned that DOGMA was interesting and valuable. In fact, it would even have been a mistake to have exposed these readers to intellectual texts. They would not have read them.

Trier has often been criticized for having made the manifesto as a gimmick! Yes, maybe, but it attracted the press. Without the press and general public opinion, Jytte Hilden would not have tried to give the 15 million crown check to DOGMA. Without the press there would have been no discussion about the quarrel between Trier and the Danish Film Institute. Without this discussion DR television could not have intervened. Without this intervention there would have been no *Feast*.

The press did not conceive DOGMA, but it was a mighty midwife.

Auteurs in Style The Heresy or Indulgence of the Dogma Brothers

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

Only a few films have been made under the Dogma directors' vow of chastity. I have seen the first three. But a lot of noise has been made about it – in newspapers, as well as in journals and magazines: articles, students' analyses, interviews, reviews *en masse*; much of it resulting in waves of hype, and all of it results of a brilliant piece of public relations. So, what has happened? The Dogma rules and the vows are all about cinematic language: what is allowed and what is not. The question we may ask is: what is referred to as the contrast to the Dogma comrades' chastity and their disavowal of more sexy film appeals? What contexts and traditions of film art and theory may be at play in, or behind, the Dogma search for realism and authenticity?

Art and artists on the screen

In *The Celebration*, two brothers, Christian and Michael, and their sister, Helene, are in their respective rooms. When Helene has found the letter from Christian's twin sister and read about their father's abuse, she goes "Boo!" to scare the receptionist and distract him so he won't notice her state of mind. Within a second or so, a rapid, beautiful montage connects what is happening at this exact moment in the three rooms. In normal everyday life there is no connection whatsoever, but the editing does the trick. Pure illusion. Is everything in this place and

movie OK, and taking place according to the laws of nature? The effectively executed and artistically beautiful editing, which, not only here, but all through the film, establishes telling connections between reactions and otherwise separate events, might suggest supernatural forces at play. On the other hand, this may not be the case, especially bearing in mind the down-to-earth denial of illusionism of the manifesto. But then again, at least the artistry of the editing (fortunately not mentioned in the "thou shall not" rules) has brought a magician, in the shape of the director-editor, into the viewer's field of sight.

Similarly, in *The Idiots* someone plays impossible, ironic games about levels of fiction and pieces of reality within other fictions and so on. To take an example: is the director (voice)/cameraman interviewing the "real" people who are acting and cheating like "spassers", or is he interviewing the real actors playing the "real" characters? Or, is he *playing* a director interviewing these folks? In this piece of Dogma realism, we have illusions within endless illusions. But the fact remains that the play is initiated by the storyteller, embodied in this role and stylistic gesture. "Was it a game, then?"

Mifune is no less unrealistic than Dogma # 1 and # 2. A yuppie groom, Kresten, is forced out of the capital and his honeymoon days, back to the hillbilly-like farm and hometown. Not only has his father died, he also has to take care of his mentally retarded brother. Meanwhile, in the big city, a prostitute, Liva, (making money this way to keep her little brother in an expensive boarding school) is trying to escape from pimps and threatening customers. Kresten hires her as a maid. The

four outcasts must try to get back on their feet by themselves. Complications and almost no help from any friends – plus a pot of gold in the end. It is a folktale on film, with small people who become larger than life, thanks to a filmmaker whose use of locations and performances contributes to a heartwarming experience, as well as reflections on weighty topics like solidarity, ambition, love, prejudice and the difficult job of growing up. What else does an almost according-to-formula, folk tale-like movie like this need to do to make the audience smile or laugh *with* and not *at* the characters? (In this respect it is definitely different from *Idiots* and *Celebration*, in both of which it is difficult to find very many characters to sympathize with). In short, artistic control with a human touch. It seems to me that Kragh-Jacobsen has a more mature view of life and his fellow men, and that you feel this even in the editing, use of light, framing control, as well as in other stylistic details. Not that the characters in *Mifune* are not complex figures, because they are, but the filmmaker's craftsmanship is practiced in a way that balances bitter and sweet in most scenes. It may be easier to make misanthropic films like *Idiots* and *Celebration*, but *Mifune* succeeds in making a rather implausible script into a warm, thought-provoking experience. In contrast, you may ask: is it possible to disagree with *Celebration* on the question of incest? Does it provoke really surprising characterizations of family members? Is it possible to find any points of discussion in *Idiots'* workshop of self-reflections?

Realist commandments, traditional discussion

Earlier attempts to rebel against conventional film and decadent contemporary cinema have failed, or so they say. In the search for

authenticity, the manifesto refers to la Nouvelle Vague: "In 1960, enough was enough! Cinema was dead and had to be revived. The goal was right, but the means were wrong. The new wave became a ripple that hit the beach and became mud." (Dogma 95). Money, and the traditions of the film industry, eventually corrupted the French directors' attempt at a new, fresh, down-to-earth cinema. "The concept of the director as auteur was bourgeois romanticism from the start and therefore – false." (Ibid). An urge to find authenticity and some kind of realistic means of cinematic storytelling runs through the document. The tradition in which the Dogma brothers seek their ancestors is, of course, that of the French Nouvelle Vague and Italian Neorealism.

Theory – realism and/or reality?

There is a long theoretical and critical tradition of discussing the relationship between film and reality, and different views on the matter have been used to promote different styles of filmmaking. Is film just an "automatic" reproduction of reality, and is it a worthwhile effort to enhance the impression of being close to everyday life? In "Film as art" (1933) Rudolf Arnheim wrote:

There are still many educated people who stoutly deny the possibility that film might be art. They say, in effect: "Film cannot be art, for it does nothing but reproduce reality mechanically." Those who defend this point of view are reasoning from the analogy of painting. In painting, the way from reality to the picture lies via the artist's eye and nervous system, his hand and, finally, the brush that puts strokes on the canvas. The process is not mechanical as that of photography, in which the light rays reflected from the object are collected by a system of lenses and are then directed onto a sensitive plate where they produce chemical changes. Does this state of affairs justify our denying photography and film a place in the temple of the Muses?"

Apart from the possibility that Dogma '95 may be joking with their own temple order, so to speak, what is essential to our discussion of the manifesto and a tradition of realism is not the film-as-art-discussion as such, but that this "mechanical" or "automatic" point of view has been so persistent in critical, theoretical, and artistic considerations of film and authenticity. It is a notion that has informed thought in all three fields for years and years. Thus, Arnheim characterizes the notion that film is a direct copy or reprint of reality, and he, of course, goes on to "refute thoroughly and systematically" the idea that film and photography are nothing but mechanical reproductions.

Still, it has remained a traditional point of view, characteristic of points of departure for further theorizing, from Kracauer through Bazin and Barthes to Metz. Note how close the Arnheim quote is to Barthes ("Rhetorique de l'image", 1964): "Il faut donc opposer la photographie, message sans code, au dessin, qui, même dénoté, est un message codé." Taking the comparison a step further, he states that the photographer (and the cinematographer and film director, I infer) is not obliged to make distinctions and choose "entre le signifiant et l'insignifiant: le dessin ne reproduit pas *tout*, et souvent même fort peu de choses, sans cesser cependant d'être un message fort, alors que la photographie, si elle peut choisir son sujet, son cadre et son angle, ne peut intervenir à l'intérieur de l'objet (sauf truquage); autrement dit, la dénotation du dessin est moins pure que la dénotation photographique."

As Arnheim points out, this is simply not so. The cinematographer and the director have countless opportunities to choose and manipulate during planning and shooting footage, as well as in postproduction.

In much the same way as Barthes, Kracauer ("Theory of Film") is of the opinion that one, if not *the* most important property of the film medium is this indexical connection to reality. The impression is that this point of view, which is accurately described, very much to the point, by Arnheim, has been inherited by both Barthes and even Metz, within a French tradition whose reflections on the film medium are very much centered around, and deeply influenced by, the prominent figure of André Bazin.

An important part of Bazin's conception of film is the faithfulness with which it is able to capture reality (I am aware that this is not everything, but it's there). He elaborated on many, not least psychological-phenomenological nuances in his understanding of cinema, but in this light he even saw the development of film language as a growing approximation to the perfect reproduction of the world: the lifelike reproduction of real life developed from realist painting through still photography, to cinematography, talking movies, color, depth of field, wide screen, etc. In some places Bazin talks about the basic properties of film in an almost Kracauerian voice, as it were. In Metz, even those of his texts inspired by psychoanalysis are underpinned by belief in the realistic movie picture. Things are not present in the theatre, only pictures move on the screen. But the lack he talks about, and the

possible desire to get hold of what is lacking, is deeply dependent upon (belief in) realistically reproducing pictures. In the same line of succession, even Deleuze ventriloquizes in the same Bazin-and-Barthes-voice as the one Arnheim ironically characterized so well: not only does he talk about "automatic" images of cinema (preface to English edition of "Cinema 1. The movement-image"), he also projects his concepts of so-called movement-image and time-image "onto orthodox historiography of style" (see: David Bordwell: "On the history of film style", 116-17). Even the emergence of the time-image around World War II (that is, Welles: "Citizen Kane" & Neorealism) he discovers – "just as Bazin argued". Incisively characterized by Bordwell, Deleuze's philosophical essay rests and relies "unquestioningly" upon traditional research and writings about film language and history.

So, concepts of cinematic realism and belief in the cinema-photographic picture run through the history of film and film style, becoming tradition; and through many writings and critical presentations they have been disseminated to filmmakers as well as audiences. The ghost of cinematic mimesis is still wandering through studios and cinema theatres, and settling in television sets.

Film tradition and style, artists and auteurs

The tradition in which Dogma inscribes itself goes back to Neorealism and La Nouvelle Vague, and references also include Cinéma Vérité. Among the films are classics like *Ossessione* (Visconti, 1942), *Bicycle Thieves* (de Sica, 1947), *Umberto D* (de Sica, 1952), *Rome – Open City* (Rossellini, 1945), *A bout de souffle* (Godard, 1959) and *Les quatre cents*

coups (Truffaut, 1959). These too, were films that took the shooting into the streets, into apartments, small rooms, cityscapes, and the open country. Some used handheld cameras; in many cases amateurs as actors; daylight and streetlights instead of lamps.

Apart from their freshness and devotion to the everyday life of ordinary people, at least in retrospect it is evident that they are very carefully made, with great artistry in drama, even melodrama, often a fine sense of comedy, precise camerawork, and meticulous editing; all of it combined in an overall sense of cinematic style. Thus I contend that the most important characteristics of these traditions or schools of cinematic fiction is not what is traditionally called realism, but the development of certain, uniquely cinematic, styles of relating stories. Hence, in many ways I think that traditional theories miss the point of what realism means to cinema in general, as well as in their descriptions of neorealist and other films. This has to do with the point of view that film as such is almost a duplication of reality.

In much the same way, the Dogma manifesto mistakes its own rules or commandments for authenticity. They seem to want to make one film practice more true-to-life than others, but what in effect is more important in their films are the nuances to be found in the style of their cinematic language, and the artistic choices involved in their practice. That is to say they position a narrator – or make him visible, so to speak – through the storytelling activity of the camera and the editing. This is the art and the artistic achievement, in old neo- as well as new realistic films, in new, as well as old new waves.

In the perspective of the reflections on film and theory, history and tradition outlined here, the Dogma papers and films tend to be rather contradictory. Far from being direct, like, for instance, *cinéma vérité*-like workshops, the more important part of their effort is that they insist on their stylization and that the viewers are made aware of things like the use of the camera, visual quality and the somewhat strained presentation of themes. People begin to discuss both style and the Artist behind it, rather than what the pictures may tell us.

The Dogma monks don't want to be considered artists, but there you are: they are given at least as much credit for these small productions (if not on screen, then everywhere else) as others are for films with a more traditional look.

From neo-realism to *cinéma vérité*, film history has reliably proved that authenticity is a chimerical goal. Sooner or later, the impression of raw immediacy congeals and stands exposed as a style like any other. (Peter Matthews, *Sight and Sound*, March 1999).

Consequently, most of the virtuosity you find displayed in the three films is in the editing, which is precisely *not* mentioned in Dogma's vow of chastity. In the creative urge, and the desire to experiment – lies the Dogma Auteurs' Art, which carries on the tradition of going into a clinch with film language itself. Not that every part of the few examples reaches the level of the pioneers whose shoulders they stand upon, but with a few, public relations-related tools, they have initiated a surprising amount of discussion about something as exotic as the details of film language and style, both within the film industry and among filmmakers, as well as in the audience.

To the extent that the Dogma Auteurs succeed in meeting the audience in a meaningful discussion, in an arena defined by their stories and the way they tell them, it is not really on the basis of the Dogma principles. Rather, one may see it as a result of heresy against their own vows and commandments. In the light of this, any purchase of tickets in a positive spirit, and as a sign of interest, may help the filmmakers to buy indulgence.

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Great Cry and Little Wool

Niels Weisberg

Historically, neorealism in 1944-1945, the British "free cinema" of 1956-1959, and the French New Wave of 1958-1959 show the first efforts that were made to create a cinema that was not costly, that came closer to reality, and that was free from slavery to technique.

Louis Marcorelles, 1973

In a press release of October 8th 1999, signed by the four Dogma brothers, it says that "considering the fact that there are numerous practical problems connected with our review of aspiring Dogma films, we have decided on a change of practice when issuing Dogma certificates. In future the director himself is solemnly to declare his adherence to the Dogma95 Manifesto."¹

And the new practice is further revised in a press release of March 9th 2000 with the establishing of a Dogma Secretariat. A fee, varying from 5.000 to 15.000 Danish kroner, for certification is introduced, with the possibility of a dispensation if very good reasons are stated. "Please note," states the press release, "that Dogma Certificates shall be issued solely on the basis of a signed and sworn statement to the effect that the Vow of Chastity has been adhered to in full and without any review of the applicant films! After a film has been certified and

¹ www.dogme95.dk

officially numbered we shall, however, appreciate to receive a VHS copy (preferably with English subtitles) for our Dogma Library."²

And seeing that Thomas Vinterberg in an interview on November 4th 1999 declares, "...after all Dogma 95 in my eyes has become convention in itself,"³ let's look at certain aspects of this quickly outdated, anti-bourgeois not wave, but rather ripple on the vast ocean of cinema.

In its iconoclastic reaction against "certain tendencies" and "the cosmeticised" cinema, which primarily must mean Hollywood mainstream, the Dogma manifesto insists that "the characters' inner lives justify the plot", which by the way is the case with most good films. And the manifesto also relates itself to the French New Wave and the truth ("My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and my settings"), a word which instantly suggests the Italian Neorealism. And luckily, though critics can never fully agree, we have a defining set of rules (not dogmatic, mind you) of these two movements – with the crucial difference that both have been compiled by critics long after that the two movements had begun.

10 Points of Neorealism⁴

1. A message: for the Italian filmmakers, cinema is a way of expression and communication in the true sense of the word.
2. Topical scripts inspired by concrete events; great historical and social issues are tackled from the point of view of the common people.
3. A sense of detail as a means of authentication.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ In 1952 the Paris journal *Films et Documents* published its "Ten points of neorealism". They are quoted in Mira Liehm: *Passion and Defiance. Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*. Berkeley; University of California Press, 1984, p.131f.

4. A sense of the masses and the ability to surprise (De Sica) or manipulate them in front of the camera (De Santis, Visconti): the protagonists are captured in their relationship to the masses.
5. Realism: but reality is filtered by a very delicate sensitivity.
6. The truth of actors, often nonprofessionals.
7. The truth of decor and a refusal of the studio.
8. The truth of the lighting.
9. Photography reminiscent of the reportage style stresses the impression of truth.
10. An extremely free camera; its unrestricted movements result from the use of postsynchronisation.

A list of shared characteristics of the French New Wave (including the Cahiers group, the Left Bank group, and the "commercial" one, e.g. Vadim)⁵

1. Many films were made on low budgets.
2. The Cahiers group often worked on each other's films and shared crews
3. Stories were often original or based on "hard-boiled" or "pulp" American fiction.
4. Characters were often "young and reckless".
5. Location filming, in Paris or well-known tourist spots.
6. Cinematography was improvised, self-conscious, innovatory.
7. Films were riddled with references and "hommages" to Hollywood and the great European "art" directors (Renoir, Dreyer, Rossellini, etc.).
8. Some were European co-productions and they appealed to young audiences throughout Europe.
9. They produced their own stars – Jean-Paul Belmondo, Anna Karina, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Jeanne Moreau, Anouk Aimée, Jean-Claude Brialy, etc.

These two movements did not need dogmatic rules; the participants knew that they differed too much to adopt a common set of rules, but by distancing themselves from mutual enemies and conditions and by rejecting old conventions they had something in common.

⁵ Roy Stafford, "Paris 1960. The French New Wave", *Film Reader*, no. 1, 1996, p.34f.

Italian Neorealism

The neorealists opposed 20 years of fascism, the war, and a film industry which had neglected to deal with the reality of contemporary Italy and instead had dedicated itself to escapism. Now new Marxist directors (Visconti, De Santis) could meet with more experienced colleagues (Rossellini, De Sica), whose careers had begun under the auspices of fascism, to launch a project of documenting a new postwar reality (Zavattini talked about "this hunger for reality, for truth"⁶), of showing poverty as it really existed in its authentic environment, of depicting daily life in all its facets, of upgrading dialects at the expense of Tuscan, favored by the fascists – in short, of vindicating common human conditions as openly and as honestly as possible. This project did not require a fixed technique (few neorealist films showed all the ten characteristics); the aesthetics of the directors differed too much, and furthermore they "never intended to reduce their narratives to mere depiction of the 'real world', to 'record and reveal the physical reality' as advocated by Zavattini"⁷, but they were more concerned with political-historical issues (Visconti) and/or with moral ones. "'There doesn't exist a *technique* for capturing truth,' Rossellini agreed. 'Only a moral position can do it' – a *desire* 'to understand, to understand fully, ...a greater curiosity about individuals', not merely their 'surface', but 'the most subtle aspects of their soul'."⁸

⁶ Cesare Zavattini, "A Thesis on Neo-Realism", in David Overbey (ed), *Springtime in Italy*, London, Talisman Books, 1978, p. 69.

⁷ Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance*, p. 71.

⁸ Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*. New York, Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 267.

Improved economic conditions, the Andreotti law (reintroducing censorship) and the directors' personal and artistic development caused the loose structure of the movement to disintegrate within a decade, and some of the directors changed their focus from the physical world to an individual psychology, i.e. a psychological realism or an inner neorealism (Rossellini, Antonioni).

The French New Wave

The New Wave was an even more heterogeneous movement. Maybe the only thing they actually had in common – a kind of 10th characteristic – was the ambition to direct a movie before turning 35 – which they all did. And this aspect of age (an early manifestation of the still dormant youth revolution) is extremely important, as it not only explains the reckless rejection of the established film language, le cinéma de papa, but also the youthful characters and subject matters in their films. Revolutionary in a political sense only makes sense when applied to Godard and certain of the Left Bank group. And even though reality was an important issue to all them, *Verfremdung*, fabricated by every possible filmic trick, was just as important to several of them: modernism and experiments of every kind (Godard, Demy, Resnais) had made their entry on the screen, partly due to technical advances, e.g. light hand cameras and portable tape machines for synchronized sound recording.

The end of the New Wave was sad, according to the Dogma manifesto. "The Wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves...the new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck".

Fair enough, I think, as everyone is entitled to an opinion. But not fair to the enormous impact the New Wave (especially Godard) exerted on world cinema, an impact which Dogma 95 is a living proof of.

Dogma 95 versus Neorealism & New Wave

The 10 Dogma rules can be divided into two main groups: one concerned with technique and one concerned with genre.

The technical group (rules 1-5 and 9) seems very ascetic, as if faith in asceticism were a prerequisite of fidelity to reality, to truth; this belief was not uncommon among certain neorealists, of course, but it still has to be proven correct.

When comparing the Dogma rules with Neorealism and New Wave we find the following similarities and differences:

Rule 1 – Only location shooting: to the Neorealists (NR) shooting on location was extremely important for ideological reasons, and that goes for the New Wave (NW), too, but for financial reasons as it was cheaper shooting on the streets with the newly invented portable equipment than shooting in a studio. Mira Liehm writes that "the production costs on the neorealist films (except for the very first ones) were usually as high as those of films shot in the studio...Shooting time was usually longer and transportation costs higher. On the other hand, the neorealists expended less money on scriptwriters and actors."⁹

Rule 2 – No "false" sound: NR nearly always shot their films silent and then post-synchronized them, which gave the camera an extended freedom of movement (and as the Italian sound technicians were used

to dubbing, they were masters of recreating perfect sounds). A portable synchronous tape recorder was invented in 1959, which made it possible for NW to produce direct sound instead of post-synchronization. In *Murder* (1930) Herbert Marshall listens to some music on the radio while shaving, and as it was technically impossible at that time to add the sound later, Hitchcock had a thirty-piece orchestra playing in the studio behind the bathroom set.¹⁰ Kragh-Jacobsen in an interview with Peter Rundle tells that "...it was really good fun and very stimulating having an accordion player behind me in that sugar beet field at five o'clock in the morning."¹¹

Rule 3 – Only hand-held camera: whereas NR used an extremely free camera resulting in steady pictures and smooth camera movements, NW used hand-held camera with shaky pictures, but nothing like the both shaken and stirred pictures that Vinterberg and especially Trier have produced.

Rule 4 – Only color: for NR color was out of the question due to financial and probably also ideological reasons (when Visconti in 1960 returned to (a sort of neo)realism in *Rocco and His Brothers*, he chose black-and-white). And NW, after its initial financial success, very soon turned to color.

Rule 5 – No optical works and filters: NR would probably not have objected to this kind of "cosmetics" if it would have served their purpose. And NW loved every kind of experimentation (Truffaut's *Day for Night*).

⁹ Mira Liehm: *Passion and Defiance*, p. 331, note 43.

¹⁰ Francois Truffaut: *Hitchcock*. London, Secker & Warburg, 1967, p. 60f.

¹¹Kragh-Jacobsen in an interview with Peter Rundle, Nov. 5, 1999.

Rule 9 – Only Academy 35mm: NR had no choice as Academy 35mm¹² was the standard format, but NW probably more often than not used various forms of Cinemascope (e.g. Dyaliscope, Techniscope) as, due to the anamorphic lens, the height of the negative frame was reduced to half (giving the pictures a grainy [read: realistic] look), and so money could be saved. I honestly wonder why Academy 35 mm is less artificial than other formats? Is it chosen to please TV?

Dogma rules 6-7-8 are about genre.

Rule 6 – No murders, weapons: NR was partly born as a reaction against the war, so weapons and murders (Rossellini's war trilogy) belonged to everyday reality. NW adapted (American) "hard-boiled" novels, and crime plots were not at all unusual even in original manuscripts.

Rule 7 – Here and now: this was perhaps the single most important trait in the neorealist movement, at least according to Zavattini. Very important for NW, but not a must (*Jules et Jim* and other films by Truffaut).

Rule 8 – No genre films: critics of NR, e.g. Raymond Durgnat, has labeled NR films "male weepies" because of their occasional melodramatic traits (especially De Sica). NW adored genre movies as a homage to their beloved Hollywood but also – as was the case with Godard in the 60s – as capitalist products open to deconstruction in film after film (*A bout de souffle* – the gangster/film noir film, *Une femme est une femme* – the musical, *Les carabiniers* – the war film, etc).

¹² Academy is the technical term for the ratio of width to height of the image both on film and screen, namely 1.33:1 or 4:3.

This leaves us with rule 10: The director must not be credited – I must admit, a very original idea, but also absolutely ridiculous.

Isn't Dogma95 just a sleek, superficial, commercial gimmick?¹³

The Dogma concept is, of course, also a game; it is for fun, at least to a certain degree, therefore the brothers can freely choose what rules to introduce. In my opinion, though, rule 8 creates serious trouble for the brothers because the 3 Danish Dogma films can easily, as I see them, be described as (partly) genre films:

Is *The Celebration* not a melodrama?

Is *The Idiots* not a melodrama combined with (pseudo-)documentarism?

Is *Mifune* not a romantic comedy?

Furthermore, (shamefully or maybe with a giggle?) all 3 brothers have conceded that they have transgressed the rules, so I find it relevant to ask how many rules a director is allowed to break – and how often – without having the Dogma certificate revoked? How about a slogan like "The most transgressive/sinful Dogma film ever made!"? If the brothers do not take the rules seriously, why should the audience?

On the other hand, if the brothers take the rules seriously, why does Trier then direct *Dancer in the Dark*, which according to rumors is more

¹³ This headline is one of the "Frequently Asked Questions" on the Dogme 95 homepage (www.dogme95.dk). The answer is (surprise, surprise) "Most definitely not", but the answer is elaborated much more interestingly a few lines later: "There is an implicit duplicity in The Dogme 95 Manifesto. On one hand it contains a deep irony and on the other it is most serious meant. Irony and seriousness is interlinked in (sic) inseparable".

like a Hollywood film, i.e. a cosmetized film, than a Dogma film, and why does Kragh-Jacobsen only want to adhere to the Dogma rules in one of the approx. five films left for him to direct.¹⁴ Are they, as they claimed happened to the New Wave directors, already up for grabs after one Dogma film?

In these days in which several new young directors have created original and unconventional works for the Danish cinema, the Dogma experiment is still an enriching contribution – as any experiment is. The rules (except number 10) are not sensationally new – on the contrary, and I have my doubts that the nauseatingly shaky images of Trier and Vinterberg are the right tools to force out the truth of the characters and the settings.

Warning

On a visit to Denmark in spring Alan Parker, experienced film director and newly appointed Chairman of the Film Council in Britain, came up with an interesting observation¹⁵. According to him Hollywood has always looked upon film as a commodity dependent on its audience, whereas European filmmakers, especially the Auteurs of the 60s and 70s thought of their films as "art" – and completely disregarded their audiences. This "fatal error" gave the Americans free reins to conquer the whole market. The new Danish Dogma concept is not nearly as destructive as the Auteur concept. Parker genuinely liked *Mifune* and *The Celebration* but strikes a warning note: before embarking on new

¹⁴ Kragh-Jacobsen interviewed by Peter Rundle, Nov. 5th 1999. www.dogme95.dk

¹⁵ Interview with Anders Lange in *Jyllands-Posten*, a Danish newspaper, March 13th, 2000.

projects filmmakers ought to consider the implications. A Dogma film is technically speaking not the kind of film that easily lends itself to the big screen. When audiences realize that, they might as well watch a film on video, why go to the cinema?

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Direct Dogma: Film Manifestos and the *fin de siècle*

Scott MacKenzie

At first glance, one can state quite simply that the history of film manifestos represents a history of one unmitigated failure after another. Indeed, one must wonder why filmmakers, theorists and radicals of all stripes continue to produce film manifestos at such a manic and prodigious rate. From the early 1900s to the early 2000s, the proliferation of film, video, and television manifestos has been immense, while their 'effects', one the whole, are quite minimal. Are the writers of film manifestos manic-depressive masochists, continually setting themselves up only to fail on a grand scale, or are the effects of film manifestos more diverse than a hard-line instrumental or intentionalist account would leave one to believe? It is this question that I wish to consider, through an examination of Dogma '95, and the 'Vow of Chastity' manifesto produced by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. How does the Dogma '95 Manifesto – and the films produced under its rubric – relate to the historical trajectory of the cinema manifesto? To examine whether or not Dogma constitutes a paradigm shift in the history of film manifesto writing, we must begin by considering the history of film manifestos themselves.

Throughout the history of the cinema, radicals and reactionaries alike

have used the film manifesto as a means of stating their key aesthetic and political goals. Indeed, film manifestos are almost as old as the cinema itself. By the early 1910s and 1920s, Italian Futurists, French Dadaists and Surrealists and German Expressionists were all producing manifestos, stating their political, aesthetic and philosophical principles. In most cases, these texts were calls to revolution – a revolution of consciousness, of political hierarchies and of aesthetic practices, which all bled together in an attempt to radically redefine the cinema and the culture in which it existed. Luis Buñuel's famous claim that the film *Un chien Andalou* (France, 1928) was a call to murder is only the most infamous of the statements in circulation at the time;¹ many others framed the ways in which *avant-garde*, experimental, and alternative film (and later, television and video) came to be understood throughout the history of cinema. Further, film manifestos can be seen as constituting the earliest form of film theory; for instance, Ricciotto Canudo's 'Manifesto for the Sixth Art' in many ways marks the beginnings of a theory of radical film practice.² Similarly, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov's Soviet manifesto on sound marks the beginnings of critical discussions on the relations between image and sound in the

¹ See Buñuel's preface to the script of *Un chien Andalou*, originally published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* 12 (1929), reprinted and translated in Jennaro Talens, *The Branded Eye: Buñuel's Un chien Andalou* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 89.

² See Ricciotto Canudo, 'The Birth of the Sixth Art (1911)', *Framework* 13 (1980), pp. 3-7.

cinema.³ Surrealism, the British documentary movement, and the rise of educational films were all framed, to varying degrees, by manifestos. In subsequent years, virtually every artistic and political movement existing outside mainstream, narrative cinema sallied forth with a manifesto, proclaiming the end of the old régimes of representation and the need to wipe the slate clean and begin anew. Here, the slicing open of the eye in *Un chien Andalou* again stands as a nodal point, encapsulating the preferred mode of address adopted by manifesto scribes.

Despite the wide variety of ideological and political points-of-view put forth in film manifestos, the rhetorical stances adopted by the writers – which foregrounded both an urgent call to arms and a profoundly undialectical form of argumentation – lead to a certain similarity in the cinematic manifesto genre. Because of the programmatic, proclamatory nature of most manifesto writing – which is an unavoidable occurrence, precisely because of the inflammatory nature of the discourse involved – the intended outcomes of manifestos were, for the most part, hopelessly doomed; yet this hopelessness added to the nihilistic romance of dramatic intervention in the public sphere. This romance was fortified by the fact that manifestos were most often texts of the moment. Intrinsicly tied not only to the cinema, but the immediate world surrounding the authors, manifestos have had, in most cases, quite short life-spans; they quickly left the world of

³ See Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov, 'Statement on Sound' reprinted and translated in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 234-235.

political intervention and became that most aberrant thing (at least in the eyes of the writers themselves), a de-clawed aesthetic text. This led to the need to write and re-write basic principles, either by design, in order to maintain relevance, or by force, because of political pressures; one only has to look at the ways in which André Breton continually rewrote his manifestos of surrealism as an example of the former, or the ways in which the fundamental, guiding principles underlying the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein necessarily shifted as intellectual montage and Lenin lead to Stalin and Socialist Realism – a sad but inevitable example of the latter.⁴

Thus far, I have painted a fairly dismal image of the effectiveness of the film manifesto in cinema culture. And, while one could argue that far more work needs to be done to elucidate, within a historical framework, how these texts circulated within the public sphere, the generalized failure of film manifestos points to the fact that the cinema scholar's interest in them as texts, and as statements of purpose, are as tied to their extremism, and the possibility they offer the reader to re-imagine the cinema, as they are to initiating changes themselves. Indeed, the cinema one imagines whilst reading these texts is often far more interesting than some of the films produced under the auspices of their influences. In many ways, therefore, it is the extremism of

⁴ For Breton's versions of the surrealist manifesto, see André Breton, *Manifestos on Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); the primary statement documenting the aesthetic renunciations of the Soviet Formalists is 'For a Great Cinema Art: Speeches to the All-Union Creative Conference of the Workers in Soviet Cinema', in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds) *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 348-355.

most manifestos that give them, if not their political foundation, then their intellectual appeal. From Luis Buñuel and Dziga Vertov, from Stan Brakhage and Guy Debord, and from Jean-Luc Godard to Laura Mulvey, the basis of the manifesto is precisely to provoke not only a new form of cinema, but a way of re-imagining the cinema itself.

How, then, does Dogma fit into the paradigm of the film manifesto as delineated above? The international popularity of the Dogma films raises interesting questions about these issues. Why would films such as *Festen* (*Celebration*, Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), *Idiots* (*Idioterne*, Lars von Trier, 1998) and *Mifunes sidste sang* (*Mifune's Last Stand*, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, 1999) have such an international appeal, when most films made in the shadow of manifestos have existed in relative obscurity? One of the key issues may be a shift in emphasis in the kind of manifesto offered by the so-called Dogma brothers; one which shifts from a properly ideological critique of cinematic production and its relation to the non-diegetical world, to a rhetoric which only addresses modes of production, and does so without offering an ideological critique as a necessary corollary to the goals of the aesthetic renunciations at the heart of the Dogma project. As John Roberts notes: 'Like many cinematic manifestos this century, Dogma 95's edicts emphasize the paralysis and decadence of commercial cinema in terms of its corrupting illusionism, trickery and sentimentality. As with the New Realism of the 1950s, Godard's Dziga-Vertov group in the late 1960s and the cinemas of national liberation of the 1970s, the relationship between social experience and the dominant forms of cinematic narration is challenged on the grounds of its loss of

authentic speech and agency'.⁵ Yet, despite these parallels with past manifesto manifestations, Roberts goes on to note that: 'What is significant about this list [of rules] is its largely technical and formal character; there are no political exhortations, or denunciations of other film makers; it is, rather, a kind of low-key DIY guide for aspirant amateurs; the fire of the 1960s avant-garde is tempered by an earnest practicality'.⁶ To the extent that the Dogma brothers do indeed attack the French *nouvelle vague*, Roberts is wrong about the lack of retrospective negation to prior cinematic movements. Nevertheless, we can see that formal experimentation and the content of the films themselves are understood to be divorced. It is this disjuncture between form and content that I wish to address presently, through an examination of the tenets put forth in the Dogma '95 manifesto. It is this thematic divorce of form from content which I contend represents the decisive break from cinematic manifesto writing of the past.

If there is a key historical antecedent and cinematic intertext invoked by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in the Dogma '95 manifesto, it is the arrival of the French *nouvelle vague* in 1960. Von Trier and Vinterberg contend that Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette were all for the overthrowing of the cinema of the past, but did not make anywhere near a decisive enough break with the past to bring about a new cinema. The Dogma brothers write:

DOGMA 95 is a rescue action!
In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for

⁵ John Roberts, 'Dogme '95', *New Left Review* 238 (1999), p. 141.

⁶ Roberts, p. 142.

resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck. Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby... false!⁷

Yet, the *auteur* cinema of *la nouvelle vague* was not a consolidated film style; it did not follow uniform rules of cinematic evolution or revolution, in the manner implied by the Dogma brothers. Truffaut himself put this vision of *la nouvelle vague* to rest 28 years earlier, when he stated:

People who say 'The New Wave has failed' without defining what they mean by that, I suppose they're thinking of 'intellectual' films which were not successful at the box-office, and with this in mind they refuse to 'label' films which pleased them or were successful – an arbitrary division since the New Wave is just as much *L'Homme de Rio* as *L'Immortelle*, *Le Vieil homme et l'enfant* as *La Musica*, *Les Cœurs verts* as *Un Homme et une femme* [...]. The New Wave did not have an aesthetic program, it was simply an attempt to rediscover a certain independence which was lost somewhere around 1924, when films became too expensive, a little before the talkies.⁸

It is individualism that the Dogma group sees as the failure of *la nouvelle vague*, yet as Truffaut points out, it is precisely the individual visions of numerous dissimilar *auteurs* that was the backbone of New Wave cinema. Nevertheless, it is the received idea that post-1960 cinema movements (New German Cinema, *cinéma direct*, British 'kitchen sink' films) stultified their radical possibilities by adopting

⁷ http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/index.htm.

⁸ François Truffaut, "'The Evolution of the New Wave': Truffaut in Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni (extracts)" in Jim Hillier, ed. *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1960s-New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 107.

'styles' of their own. Therefore, it is this kind of stylistic individualism which Dogma contends was the downfall of the art cinemas which followed in the wake of *la nouvelle vague*:

To DOGMA 95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the media becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase 'avant-garde' has military connotations. Discipline is the answer ... we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition!

DOGMA 95 counters the individual film by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as *THE VOW OF CHASTITY*.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticised to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The 'supreme' task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the '100 years' have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated? ... By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?⁹

There are many parallels between this document and the kinds of manifestos that came before; the past is decried and a new form of cinema is celebrated as a way out of the abysmal quagmire brought about by the mainstream. Yet, it is the 'Vow of Chastity', attached to the manifesto itself that shifts the dogma of Dogma away from the manifestos of the past. The need to return to a cinema of truth is underlined by the key tenets in the 'Vow of Chastity', the ten key aims of Dogma, which include:

Shooting must be done on location; The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa; The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted; The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable; Optical work and filters are forbidden; The film must not contain superficial action; Temporal and geographical alienation are

⁹ http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/index.htm.

forbidden; Genre movies are not acceptable; and The film format must be Academy 35 mm.¹⁰

The directors also refrain from 'good taste'. There are many interesting aspects to the Vows of Chastity; the first thing that springs to mind is the self-conscious religiosity of the language. Yet, combined with this unholy marriage of the spirit of the Protestant work ethic and Catholic flagellation, one finds that the vows themselves are pervaded with an irony that is typically missing in the modernist manifesto. As Thomas Vinterberg states: 'I think [...] Dogma is in the area between a very solemn thing and deep irony...' .¹¹ Indeed, the name of the movement – *Dogma* – is self-reflexively ironic in and of itself. There is also a reflexive self-consciousness lurking behind the filmmakers' assumptions about their own cinematic past; it is not only the 'others' who need to reform their truant ways. For instance, in relation to his own filmmaking, Vinterberg notes that:

We also wanted to break with the convention of filmmaking, first of all with the convention within our own filmmaking – force ourselves to try something new, due to the fact that there should be some sort of risk connected to making art. So from that aspect it's very solemn, and not rigid. On the other hand, it is a game, as it's defined in the manifesto, which is a bit arrogant, and of course, ironic also.¹²

It is this irony that allows the directors to believe in both the solemnity of Dogma and in its irony as an act of provocation. Moreover, it seems that the rhetorical provocation within the public sphere brought on by

¹⁰ The full text of the 'Vow of Chastity' can be found at:http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/vow.html.

¹¹ Robin Wood, 'Humble Guests at the Celebration: An Interview with Thomas Vinterberg and Ulrich Thomsen', *Cinéaction* 48 (1998), p. 50.

¹² Wood, p. 50.

the writing of a 'manifesto' is as much about opening up a critical discussion about the state of the cinema as it is about following rules while producing films. Lars von Trier echoes these assumptions when he states:

I don't think it's necessarily crucial that the Dogma rules be followed. I think the issue of whether you can gain something by throwing away total freedom in exchange for a set of rules is worth discussing. And it's interesting to see whether some of those rules might be of use to others. I've created rules before, so I think I've demonstrated that they can lead to something positive. I think the need to go back to basics, which the rules are a response to, is more urgent now than ever before. I would find it amusing if Dogma could continue to exist like a little pill you could take when there was too much of the other kind of thing, too much refinement and distancing. [...] But I don't know what will happen to the Dogma concept.¹³

Therefore, Dogma is not the only way to make film, as Vinterberg notes: 'I think to make another Dogma film right now would be suicidal, because the fine thing about Dogma is to create renewal, and to do another Dogma film right after would be creating another convention, which would be very oppressive'.¹⁴

Another level of irony, mixed in with the guilt of the Protestant work ethic, is the repenting of sins that the filmmakers undertake when they break their own, self-prescribed rules. The role played by sin in this instance is quite curious, as it has no moral content, only form. Or more precisely, one can only sin in regards to the form of the film itself. However, not all the Dogma directors look at the manifesto as

¹³'Lars von Trier Interview' in Mette Hjort and Ib Bondebjerg (eds.) *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect Press, forthcoming 2001).

¹⁴ Wood, p. 51.

simply a formal challenge. Von Trier, the *agent provocateur* of the new Danish cinema, takes a less ironic tone when dealing with the implications of the Dogma directives, and feels there are moral issues at stake behind the formal claims made in the 'Vow of Chastity'. Further, he takes issue with those who see Dogma as an empty formal exercise:

But there have been a number of crises and the idea of my having full control over my films has at times been a total lie. For example, Aalbæk and Vibeke Windeløv allowed filters to be used in connection with *The Idiots*. That was an insane cock-up, but it may have involved a break-down in communication on my part. Part of the problem with the Dogma concept has been that nobody has taken it completely seriously. It's been viewed as a bit of a joke [...]. Why would anyone in his right mind impose such ridiculous restrictions on himself?¹⁵

Do these restrictions, these abstinences, lead to a revitalized form of cinema for the second century? Does Dogma lead to a new kind of film, where the changes are felt not only in terms of production, but also in terms of content? Despite the hyperbole found in von Trier's many pronouncements about Dogma, it is indeed the case that, perhaps against the wishes of the Dogma brothers, the aesthetics of the manifesto have lent themselves to three films that all share broadly similar concerns: those of the dysfunctional family and the ways in which the psychical and mental harm done by families needs to be sorted out. Further, all three films have characters that are the agents responsible for the re-imagining of the family: in *Festen*, it is Christian (Ulrich Thomsen); in *Idioterne*, both Karen (Bodil Jørgensen) and Stoffer (Jens Albinus) play this role, albeit in strikingly different ways;

¹⁵ 'Lars von Trier Interview' in Hjort and Bondebjerg, op. cit.

and in *Mifune*, the surrogate family constructed by Kresten (Anders Berthelsen) and Liva (Iben Hjejle) compares favorably to Kresten's more 'traditional' family back in Copenhagen.

It is possible that Dogma was a moment in the sun, whose glory days are, like all film manifestos before it, already fading. Despite the call for permanent change, the directors are already talking wistfully about the Dogma past:

But I still think that Dogma might persist in the sense that a director would be able to say, 'I feel like making that kind of film'. I think that would be amusing. I'm sure a lot of people could profit from that. At which point you might argue that they could just as easily profit from a different set of rules. Yes, of course. But then go ahead and formulate them. Ours are just a proposal.¹⁶

Yet, it is this proposal that has re-invigorated debates around the nature of both art and political films at the end of the first century of the cinema. Furthermore, by embedding within the modernist film manifesto a profound sense of irony, the Dogma brothers have revitalized, for a short while, the notion of the film manifesto and its function with both the cinema and the public sphere. Despite the narrative similarities of the three Danish Dogma films thus far, this act alone is worth celebrating.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Film Purity, the Neo-Bazinian Ideal, and Humanism in Dogma 95

Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell

Dogma 95 has attracted and divided critical opinion. This code of filmmaking has been described as a gimmick, a form of self-ironisation, and as a provocative challenge to dominant cinematic conventions. It has been viewed as imaginative, but also as a transcription of previous film formalisms and art cinemas such as Italian neo-realism; and as an approach that liberates the filmmaker and allows for improvisation, but also as a constrictive code that establishes stringent stylistic and aesthetic parameters. Arguably, the Dogma code has been a source of greater discussion than the films with which it has become associated. What Dogma 95 has provoked is an exciting re-examination of questions of film realism, truth and purity, and precisely at a time when Hollywood appears to be enraptured by a cinema of attractions, driven by post-production effects, and new media technologies such as computer generated images. The questions of film purity that Dogma 95 raises will be considered in this article in connection with the development of an ideal that we suggest is neo-Bazinian, and the relationship between the underlying ideological values of the Dogma manifesto and the cultural context in which it has appeared.

Filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini and Dziga Vertov have been cited as influential to Dogma's project. In an editorial for the film journal

Cineaste, which expresses scepticism about Dogma's motives, the manifesto is described as occupying "a space (not exactly in the here or the now) where neorealism might be imagined to converge with direct cinema or *cinéma vérité*".¹ Dogma, however, displays a degree of experimentation that is congruous with early filmmaking practices. Noël Burch identifies in early cinema – a period that could be designated as pre-1908, or pre-Griffithian – a Primitive Mode of Representation (PMR), associated with innovation and novelty. This screen dialect was then replaced by an Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR), which by 1919 had become fully established and, for Burch, restrained the parameters of cinematic style through a "set of (written or unwritten) directives which has been historically interiorised by directors and technicians as the irreducible base of 'film language'".²

Dogma is post-IMR. Thomas Vinterberg talks about taking "away the makeup" and "trying to undress the film".³ Dogma's rejection of film's formal precision is both a stripping back to the improvisation, resourcefulness and immediacy of much of early cinema, and an excoriation of the conventions of a prevailing filmmaking practice which has manufactured conformity to a series of recognised stylistic and aesthetic procedures.

¹ "Editorial", in *Cineaste* 25: 1 (December 1999), p. 4.

² Noël Burch, programme commentary for his film *Correction, Please or how we got into pictures* (1979), p. 3.

³ Robin Wood, "Humble Guests at the Celebration: An Interview with Thomas Vinterberg and Ulrich Thomsen", in *CineAction* 48 (December 1998), pp. 50-51.

This raises one of a number of contradictions in the Dogma manifesto. It claims to oppose manufactured conformity in today's filmmaking, but at the same time it devises its own "rules", to which filmmakers must "swear to submit".⁴ These include the prohibition of studio production, artificial lighting and filters, and the requirement that the camera be hand-held. Submitting to the Dogma collective's "Vow of Chastity" supposedly ensures the filmmaker remains unblemished and free of what Vinterberg describes as the "laziness and mediocrity in both European and American cinema".⁵ The guiding principles of the Vow, which leads to the awarding of a certificate of authentication (exhibited prior to the screened opening credits) for finished films operating within the rules of the code, establishes an ideal of realism that proclaims productions to be virtuous and pure. An ideal that is neo-Bazinian.

André Bazin, who was a film purist, was concerned with isolating realism as a fundamental property of photography and film. Bazin insisted on the necessity of photographic realism as part of a wider conceptualisation of the world and, as with the Dogma collective, the representation of 'reality' as an empirical process precisely because of a belief that the real exists concretely and manifestly. For Bazin, it was the filmmakers' duty to depict reality as truthfully as possible. An advocate of the depiction of an ontologically ambivalent screen reality in which the viewer is free to select from the image, Bazin regards a film to be truthful if unaltered by

⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

⁵ Richard Porton, "Something Rotten in the State of Denmark: An Interview with Thomas Vinterberg", in *Cineaste* 24: 2-3 (March 1999), p. 19.

human intervention or manipulation. The film spectator's relationship to the image should be faithful to the experience of the image observed by the spectator in reality.

Bazin wrote that the Egyptians, by mummifying their dead, were able to preserve the appearance of the deceased, thereby preserving a representation of life. He argued that the photographic image should perform a similar function and not simply offer the survival of an image, but the creation of a resemblance of the real: an "impression", "tracing", or "fingerprint".⁶

The use of cinema technology was approved by Bazin if it enhanced the spectator's relationship with the image's realist effect. He therefore liked deep focus photography, widescreen, and mobile and unpunctuated camera movements. He expressly disliked anything that treated film as an art of manipulation, that could bend and shape nature into what he saw as a distorted version of reality: accentuated editing and lighting, back projections, and spurious *mise-en-scène*. *Dogma*, too, rejects such distortions of the real, declaring that "[p]rops and sets must not be brought in. (If a particular prop is necessary to the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found)", and that "[s]pecial lighting is not acceptable". The *Dogma* manifesto displays a Bazinian belief in the likeness between a recorded vision and an individual's experience, and in the movement of the camera as opposed to its static positioning.

⁶ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* volume 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp.9-16.

Vinterberg and Lars von Trier have both opted for digital video technology allowing for the camera to be hand-held (rule 3 of the manifesto), but they do not embrace technology that can aid, through illusion, the spectator's acceptance of a reality-like experience.

Bazin saw that the introduction of new formats, such as VistaVision and Cinerama in the 1950s, would enable the viewer to no longer be confined to cinema's "small box". Cinema has since undergone a dramatic technological revolution, but in the direction of what often appears to be an emphasis on excess and audience seduction through maximum illusion, as opposed to anything that may be regarded as common and natural. Such a fascination with illusion was present in von Trier's earlier films – as he admits, he had "an almost fetishistic attraction to film technology", and then he "reached a point [where he]...couldn't get any further".⁷

The 'back to basics' approach of Dogma has not been unique, and at the start of cinema's second century other filmmakers have been attracted to new media forms, which allow an immediacy in production, such as small hand-held cameras and digital video technology. The video aesthetic that has emerged is (often) deliberately 'amateurish' and anti-productivist, appears to have minimal need for a scripted performance, and favours the long take. This has facilitated a move away from the conventions of continuity

⁷ Patricia Thomson, "The Idiots Plays By Von Trier's Rules", in *American Cinematographer* 81: 1 (January 2000), p. 20.

editing, which offered one highly constructed form of representation, to a style of filmmaking in which editing is produced *in situ* or not at all.

The possibilities offered for new ways of storytelling were crystallised around the phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). While the claim that the film was 'found footage' was fairly rapidly exploded, it was the film's style – a shaky camera and a low tech, reduced aesthetic – that contributed to its novelty. *The Blair Witch Project* seemed to promise not simply a 'return' to the basics of film-making, but a 'truthful' and authentic form of storytelling in the form of documentary. Its enormous impact seems to point the way to the emergence of a popular 'cinema of truth'. Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000) has been equally significant. Eschewing all forms of editing, and dependent on actor improvisation, this film foregrounds the innovative possibilities of unorthodox approaches to filmmaking.

Dogma, too, refuses dominant filmmaking conventions. In an interview for a British television documentary, director Søren Kragh-Jacobsen compares the imperative that drove *Dogma* with that which impelled rock and pop musicians to go 'unplugged' and to perform acoustically in the early 1990s.⁸ Just as the technical perfection, obsession with electronic sounds, and bland musicality of pop in the eighties produced the radical response of unplugged performance, Hollywood's excesses (apparently) led to the *Dogma* manifesto.

⁸*This Film is Dogme 95*, tx *FilmFour* digital, 26 March 2000.

Similarly, the over-determination of the figure of the auteur/director as star (Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino) is countered by the Dogma model of not crediting the director.

Dogma's commitment to the idea of purity surpasses the desire to strip away such excesses of film, producing a further contradiction. Dogma is overtly (and theatrically) 'political' in its intent, as the writing of a film 'manifesto' signifies. For the Dogma project seems to be about the recovery of ideological as well as film purity, and the Dogma productions offer a radically confrontational representation of Danish society and middle-class family life.

It is not a coincidence that domestic space is central to all three of the 'first wave' of Dogma projects, although it is figured differently in each text. In *Festen* (1998), the family country house/hotel is the splendidly whited sepulchre of bourgeois corruption; in *The Idiots* (1998), the uncle's 'borrowed' villa is transformed into a commune; and in *Mifune* (1999), the dilapidated farmhouse with its threadbare furnishings symbolises the loss of emotional values which are eventually recovered. In each film, the house is the locus of emotional transformation and catharsis for its main protagonists.

There is a gap, however, between Dogma's rhetoric of radical intervention – and Lars von Trier's semi-serious invocation of the revolutionary 'moment' of 1968⁹ – and the filmmakers' own apparent

⁹ Ibid.

commitment to humanism. This is especially evident in *Dogma*'s tendency to valorise emotional 'truth' as an absolute analogous to empirical reality. In Vinterberg's *Festen*, for example, the corrupt patriarch is confronted by his son, Christian, who reveals that the memory of a history of paternal sexual abuse drove his twin sister to suicide. Yet while the staging and filming of this confrontation at the father's sixtieth birthday dinner is remarkably compelling, the film's relatively uncritical emphasis on the necessity of the son's triumph seems profoundly humanist. Christian is empowered to 'speak for' his dead sister and a feminist reading of the film might conclude that the issue of incest is displaced by the film's focus on the necessary renewal of patriarchal power in the figure of Christian.

We are shown Christian's hallucinations of his dead sister, and this is one of several instances when *Festen* breaks the *Dogma* "rules". Perversely, this is also one of the most powerful moments in the film, and its contravening of the code seems to suggest that there is a lack of fit between the story Vinterberg wants to tell and the formal limitations that he has set himself. *Dogma* films can only inadequately represent psychological interiority, desire, dreams and fantasy because of a commitment to the empirical. Yet it is precisely these areas that are central to the subject matter *Dogma* seems to want to deal with, and that present us with the most intense, suggestive and complex moments in the films.

Perhaps it is *Mifune's* attempts to offer a story that is, in essence, a fairytale, that leads to its struggle with the Dogma code, and was responsible for its indifferent reception. In contrast to the first two Dogma films, *Mifune's* deployment of stock genre characters – the tart with a heart, the reluctant yuppie and the idiot-savant – as its main protagonists; its evasion of the 'dark' subjects it introduces; and its deployment of a happy ending produces a problematic relationship between the demands of narrative and those of Dogma. Arguably, without the Dogma label attached to it *Mifune* would have been overlooked by much of its eventual audience.

Mifune repeatedly stages and invokes the mystical and the esoteric, but because of the rigors of Dogma's conventions it is limited in its magical realism: the fantastic can be implied but not shown. For example, the crop circle which mysteriously appears towards the end of the film is significant yet its meaning is rendered opaque.

Interestingly, like *The Idiots*, and even *Festen* in its invocation of *Hamlet*,¹⁰ *Mifune* is a film that engages with the theme of role-playing and game-playing in diverse and often complex ways. Liva's day-job as a prostitute in Copenhagen requires her to act the part of a sexual dominatrix for her wealthy customers; she is mistaken for Linda, a comic-strip heroine from outer space, when she arrives at the farmhouse; and her brother pretends to be an obscene phone-caller. Most crucially Kresten plays at being 'Mifune', a Samurai warrior, for

¹⁰ See Porton, p. 18.

his brother Rud, and this return to a childhood game is what brings them together. Similarly, when Kresten and Liva playfully whitewash each other rather than the house, their relationship is transformed. The film seems to be asserting that play is essential to identity, and that a return to childhood is necessary to the characters' emotional recovery.

In *Mifune*, as in *The Idiots* and *Festen*, the narrative's emphasis on the importance of performance as a way of laying bare emotions articulates a central underlying humanism implicit in the Dogma films. Characters are repeatedly stripped of their social 'costumes' and social roles, and forced to confront emotional truths about themselves as a way of moving forward.

An interview with Daniel Kothenschulte on Dogma 95

Richard Raskin

Daniel Kothenschulte, born in 1967, is a staff critic on several German dailies, including *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and the weekly *Die Zeit*. He is a regular contributor to the film magazines *Film Dienst* and *Steadycam*, and is the author of *Nachbesserungen am Amerikanischen Traum* (first published in 1998, and about to reappear in a new expanded edition), dealing with the films directed by Robert Redford. He has also written widely on film history, performance and installation art and popular culture.

What were your initial impressions when you first heard about Dogma 95?

I was happy because somebody was reviving the manifesto idea...

Were there specific aspects of the Dogma manifesto that especially appealed to you?

One thing I liked from the very beginning was that guns were excluded from films. That was 1995. If you see film historically, that is already an era gone by. That era was mostly influenced by the works of Quentin Tarantino. And I still think that Dogma is a reaction against that wide popularization of a certain... not only style but an issue in American cinema: the rediscovery of the gangster film from a post-modern angle. That means focusing on the reverse side of that genre. Having the gangster waiting on the loo for his next occasion to kill somebody and reflecting on some pop cultural issue, like Madonna's feet or some such thing. [*Laughter.*]

There was also the advent of a sub-genre in American cinema called the "kids-and-guns" movie. All you needed were some mentally stunted kids and a gun, and it didn't matter what they did. To people who are looking for reasonable storytelling, this is of course a nightmare.

What about those parts of the Dogma manifesto that mention refraining from personal taste, from being an artist and from creating a "work"? Did they also appeal to you?

Yes, because it was in my opinion an ironic reflection of the style in which manifestos should be written. Especially at the time of expressionism and early modernism, of course everybody wanted to tear down the establishment. But the great thing about the Dogma manifesto is that it is a typical post-modern thing to revive something that is considered old-fashioned and dated.

I once did an interview with a country singer from America, whom I liked, and who had been a punk musician before. He told me at the time, the most punk thing to do was to sing country music. [*Laughter.*] If you apply this principle to post-modernism, then at a certain time, the most post-modern thing to do was modernist stuff.

Of course, for someone who was always going for provocation, and being a proponent of post-modern cinema like Lars von Trier, at a certain time, the best way to be provocative was to revive a type of cinema that everybody was sick and tired of in the late 70s and early 80s; and that was a naïve social realism.

And as we know, this revival was accompanied by mostly digital camera techniques that, as many have already pointed out, are similar to the Arriflex in the early 70s which allowed filmmakers to direct camera movement into any space they wanted. The Dogma approach is not really the same esthetic, but at first glance it is. The interest of post-modernism doesn't go beyond the surface. That's part of post-modernism, that it touches the outward appearances of art. And Dogma deals with the outward appearance of a period in modernist cinema and plays with that image.

Had you been following Lars von Trier's career from the beginning?

Yes. The first film of his that I saw was *Europa*, which amazed me. Then I went back and saw his earlier films, and followed his career from then on.

Can you tell me what appeals to you most in Trier's films?

He has the power to create an artistic entirety, combining all the elements of film – an installation of sounds and images that can take you somewhere.

*What was your personal impression of *The Idiots*?*

I liked this film very much. It also touches on an issue in modernism: early performance cinema, early performance theater work, and the documents we have about it. So *The Idiots* looks a bit like a Vito Acconci film. There's an interesting work by the installation artist,

Mike Kelley, which he calls *Fresh Acconci* – it's a post-modern approach to the performance documents of the early 70s on the human body, video tapes which looked very flat, were made with primitive video technology and involved a very pure esthetic. A man in a room is all we see. Mike Kelley did a remake of all these classical performance films but he hired beautiful young Hollywood actors and he set the same stories in big houses with swimming pools. He gave all this false Hollywood glamour to the same performance ideas, which had nothing to do with the esthetic they came with. [...] And suddenly you could see that a lot of the things that you liked in the past about these early modern ideas, didn't have anything to do with the ideas themselves but derived rather from purist modernist image-making. With *The Idiots*, the Dogma cinema revives this *arte povera* or *art brut* esthetic of early performance work. I found that very funny.

On the other hand, we can't overlook the fact that the storytelling is very well constructed – it always is in Lars von Trier's films, in my opinion. He never forgets the usual cinema routine of touching an audience. Therefore, his work is never performance-like and never really avant-garde. In that sense, it's always classical, the way that classical Hollywood cinema is always classical. If you analyze his films, I think you would find the same plot points as in classical Hollywood cinema storytelling. And I like this contradiction.

Maybe the most provocative aspect of *The Idiots* is that it looks like a porn movie in some parts. Filmmakers, during the past twenty years, have asked themselves: what can we do to include that part of popular

cinema which has not yet found its way into mainstream cinema until now. Lars von Trier was one of the first to successfully include that. A more recent example is the French film, *Romance*, which I don't think is very successful in that respect. Again, the most provocative thing to do is to include something that had been abandoned by people for a long time. At the same time, there was a constant flirtation between mainstream cinema and pornographic cinema. I've always called this kind of cinema "intellectual porno."

[...] The depiction of sex in popular avant-garde cinema of the 60s and 70s illustrated the same desire to see the same graphic qualities as the real porno does but giving an intellectual excuse for doing so, to a different type of audience. Even in the early days of the cinema, around 1910, when attempts were made to attract an intellectual audience into the movie houses, excuses were found to show the same images of exploitation, but embedded in an intellectual context. This is what is happening today with respect to the issues and the esthetics of pornographic cinema.

Is Festen/The Celebration also a film that appealed to you?

I hated that film. I hated it really badly, especially because the audience loved it so much. The same thing happened to me with *Dancer in the Dark*, which I saw in an art cinema packed with young people, who were responsive to this cliché-ridden, bourgeois setting, which is so reminiscent of early Chabrol and of Buñuel. And then this great issue of – Oh, God, this poor kid has been abused – it is all so

predictable. You can foresee exactly what will happen. The naïve pleasure of seeing these rich people being so crude, I really found it utterly distracting... It works on such a simple level. It's like children's theater when the big bad wolf or the bad robber appears and everybody applauds. I had the same impression when that father was outed as a child-abuser.

And I hated the photography. Nobody had mentioned in the reviews I read that it was shot on video. Everybody was praising the use of light as if it had been "filmed" and obviously it wasn't filmed. I don't have anything against video. I work a lot with video art. But I hate video disguised as film, and *Festen* is video disguised as film.

So I was very happy when *Mifune* came out, which was really shot on film. I don't know Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's other work, but I assume he's a very traditional modernist, a semi-popular filmmaker who works with a traditional esthetic, without overruling anything. He was taking the Dogma esthetics very seriously, using them for a serious purpose, without that ironic post-modern approach. So this is maybe the most conventional of those films, a film that really takes improvisation seriously as a concept. Something I think that Lars von Trier cannot really do, though he aims for it. The first screenplay of *The Idiots* was based on improvisation to a great degree, but in the end, it doesn't look like improvisation at all. I don't know how he works practically during the filmmaking process, but for me, this film doesn't live up to its promise of being improvised.

You've mentioned Breaking the Waves. Do you care to comment further on that film?

This film was extraordinary on various levels. It's strange. I wish I could hate Lars von Trier throughout his work but I don't. This is a very important film for a decade that began with David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990). Both films revive ideas of absolute love and "existentialist melodrama." (I know that people who are very strict about these terms wouldn't apply them in this context, especially not to *Wild at Heart*.) I think those are two post-modern approaches to one of the truly neglected genres in popular American or British cinema, which might also be called the "fantastic romance." A number of films from the 40s, such as William Dieterle's *Portrait of Jenny* (US, 1948), Frank Borzage's *Smilin' Through* (US, 1941) and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (UK, 1944) and *A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven* (UK, 1946), all deal with the issue of love overcoming death... This very naïve and beautiful romantic idea seems to have had a comeback in some of the post-modern, popular films the 90s.

Also in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* by Leos Carax (France, 1991), which I like for the very same reason. It's a film that is as artificial as anything in recreating some realist modes in its storytelling, but at the same time is a classic fairy tale which has nothing to do with any of the contemporary issues the film evokes. And that I think must have been a key inspiration for Lars von Trier...

At any rate, I liked the way that *Breaking the Waves* revived the genre, by completely different means. The digital manipulation of the conventional film camera work by Robby Müller was something I had

never seen before in cinema. We have to keep in mind, I think, that popular cinema is always blind to the innovations of art and avant-garde cinema, and what it includes every now and then is very limited. *Breaking the Waves* is the most advanced and avant-garde film in the mainstream cinema of the time. The use of pictures out of focus, when we see through the eyes of the protagonist as tears well up in her eyes. Giving an emotional excuse for an avant-garde thing is appealing, because classical avant-garde in the modernist sense doesn't leave much room for emotion, though of course there are exceptions. But the key thing about modern music is that it doesn't help the listener in a conventional way to experience feelings. They simply avoided the famous keys that you can play to make people cry or laugh. And Lars von Trier knows a lot about those keys. He knows how to play the keyboard. So it's interesting to see how he uses a modernist look while playing on that emotional keyboard.

*Have I understood it correctly that *Dancer in the Dark* is the first Lars von Trier film that you did not like?*

Yes, and after *Dancer in the Dark*, my admiration for his work may be over for quite some time.

As a person who works both with American and European cinema, what are your views of the ways in which these cinemas are compared? I imagine that from your perspective, the comparisons sometimes look quite simplistic.

That's a difficult question, because I don't think it's so easy to distinguish between these two concepts of cinema, especially in the last twenty or thirty years.

So you feel it isn't especially relevant to compare different directions in American and European cinema today at any rate? That we simply have a world cinema now?

Maybe it's not that easy. American cinema right now has two main currents: Hollywood and the so-called American independent cinema. But American independent cinema has been promoted by the Sundance Film Festival, which in my view is a very conventional force right now. The films that are shown at Sundance and are very popular at Sundance have, in my opinion, a very conventional use of storytelling and of genres. Even films that seem to use non-mainstream techniques of storytelling, like *The Usual Suspects*, are still fundamentally conventional in the ways they tell their stories. These films surprise the viewer by slightly varying the traditional storytelling form of classical Hollywood cinema, that always has to deal with emotional conflicts. Therefore they are very classical and not avant-garde at all. Even *Being John Malkovich*. I liked that film, but its avant-garde or experimental aspects are very limited. And the main thing is that these films promote a classical concept of Hollywood storytelling.

In the early 70s when the term "American independent cinema" first turned up, it was a truly experimental field. But I don't see that right now. What I see in Europe is a development which tends to take American independent cinema as a model for commercial art house filmmaking which tends to replace a lot of traditional auteur filmmaking. This development followed a change in the policies of the film funding organizations, which especially in Germany try to find more commercial perspectives. At the same time, the advent of commercial television offered more possibilities for young script

writers and directors to enter the scene than ever before. But these young writers and directors are mainly influenced by popular American writing teachers like Syd Field. Their books, which promote classical Hollywood storytelling, have a wide circulation all over Europe. We are facing a development similar to the one in the late 20s when classical Hollywood cinema became the world model for popular filmmaking. What we are witnessing now is the second revolution of American cinema, although it appears to us as an alternative to the dominant Hollywood cinema.

I understand you've written a book on Robert Redford's work, from *Ordinary People* (1980) to *Horse Whisperer* (1998). Can you tell me about your interest in Redford?

Mostly, I wanted to see what happens when somebody who has tremendous influence in Hollywood and is so well accepted by everybody, begins to make his own films. What kinds of films would he make for his own pleasure? I found a correspondance between the films he chose to play in as an actor and the films he directed. One issue in particular appeared frequently in all his films: avoiding the expectations confronting a successful person. Redford saw himself as an actor who was cast for his good looks, but didn't consider himself good-looking at all. Usually you hear that from women, and I was very interested in exploring this from a man's point of view – about someone who is limited by expectations concerning outward appearance and trying to work against them.

Leeds International Film Festival, 8 October 2000

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