

The DOGME 95 Manifesto: DIY film production as an act of criticism

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History

In 1995, a collective of four directors Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterburg, Soren Jacobsen and Kristian Levring from Copenhagen drew up the DOGME 95 manifesto. Directors were invited to submit a film to the DOGME team in strict accordance to the manifesto rules. Participants were issued an official certificate to verify they had complied with the rules effectively.

'The Vow of Chastity'

I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 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. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the camera standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)
4. The film must be in colour. 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 is 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 so by all 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 DOGME 95, Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg

Thomas Vinterburg elaborates:

“The idea behind the DOGME films is following a series of clearly defined rules, which limit the directors possibility to lose himself in technique and fancy fine tuning. The rules of the game are the key, because if you make the rules, the ideas come storming out”¹

The ten rules remove the lengthy production set-up's associated with film making (as RSW notes):

“All of these rules have the same intention to make film making as spartan as possible. In this regard it is most clearly a rebellion against modern cinematic practices. After all film making is a technical endeavour and can very quickly become far more about the equipment than the performers. Anyone who has ever spent any time on a film set will appreciate that there is quite often a ratio of around 10:1 of down time to actual filming, usually because of constructing set ups and sometimes this can get in the way. The vow removes all this clutter, forcing the director to concentrate on the events and the acting rather than the camera crew...less fuss means a quicker shoot, a quicker shoot means far fewer cast and crew stood at the roach coach scarfing down endless supplies of free coffee and donuts. The whole process becomes much more efficient”²

Over the course of five years the DOGME films by all four DOGME brothers were released sequentially. For the purpose of cohesion I shall focus on the first six films:

- DOGME 1: *Festen* by Thomas Vinterburger
Synopsis: a morality play challenging parental authority.
- DOGME 2: *The Idiots* by Lars Von Trier
Synopsis: a twisted satire exploring disability in the context of civilised society.
- DOGME 3: *Mifune* by Soren Kragh Jacobsen.
- DOGME 4: *The King is Alive* by Kristian Levring.
Synopsis: A drama set in the desert where a bus of failed actors re-enact scenes from King Lear from memory.
- DOGME 5: *Julien Donkey Boy* by Harmony Korine,
- DOGME 6 *Lovers* by Jean Marc Barr

Lars Von Trier and the brotherhood used the DOGME 95 manifesto to unlearn their classical training. After his trilogy *Element of crime*, *Epidemic*, and *Europa* Trier felt trapped under the weight of his style:

“I had used all possible techniques to control manipulate images and sound. I made these rules to prevent me from doing so”³.

He explains:

“These movies with their stunning images, were criticised for their obsession with technique at the expense of characters”⁴

The punk-esque anti professionalism techniques of the DOGME 95 manifesto force directors to re-engage with their lost innocence. As film critic RSW explains:

“The technical clauses of the vow merely recreate the experience of being a first time filmmaker. After all, most budding directors start off with a camera, a few friends and whatever props they can rustle up around the house”⁵.

Quite possibly the intention here is to force the directors back to their roots, to

reacquaint themselves with the simplest elements”⁶

Lars Von Trier explains that the intention behind the DOGME 95 manifesto:

“One of the main objectives for me has been...To try and shake of the sense and professionalism that is stifling so many initiatives. Cinema is becoming one of the most conservative art forms and I believe that a provocation of cinema as an art form was very much in it’s place.”⁷

He discusses professionalism in terms of hampering of creativity:

“The problem is you become better at what you are doing, which means that you more easily satisfy any number of different standards, but I constantly try to force myself to undertake things I don’t yet master. That sounds very snooty, but its really true. You can become so good at producing things that they become nauseatingly boring to look at”⁸

Vinterburg explains how the manifesto was constructed:

“We asked ourselves what we most hated about film today as and then we drew up a list banning it all. It took half an hour it was a great laugh. The end result was ten restrictive rules (branded the vow of chastity)”⁹

The manifesto was a reaction against the professional techniques of mainstream cinemas. In particular its producer based ethos which favours cosmetics and illusion over story, actors and directors. The manifesto counteracts these ideas through a collectivist approach to film making based on a set of ten rules which are pro-accessible technologies and based upon principles of uniformity (which heighten the power of the director and his relationship with actors/characters).

The document is rife with a Brechtian scorn for cosmetics, illusions and trickery. Trier explains:

“The supreme task of the decadent film makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what a hundred years have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated. By the artists free choice of trickery...To DOGME 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.”¹⁰

The Oxford dictionary defines DOGME as “a principle tenant doctoral system, as laid down by the authority of the church: arrogant deceleration of opinion”¹¹ DOGME 95 proposes a “holier than thou approach” to filmmaking which is softened through Von Trier’s signature ironic humour. DOGME 95 religious imagery hints at religious notions of purification, and christ like predictions of re-birth and renewal. The movement has the trappings of a sect or secret society. The manifesto is a code or a way of being that must be adhered to. The 10 clauses echo the ten deadly sins. The “vow of chastity” mocks the sexual conservatism of the church and hints at raw

fetishism of the manifestoes intentions.

In this essay I will be exploring to what extent DOGME 95 has indeed been revelatory and whether this bare bones cinema style has transcended and transfigured the trappings of mainstream cinema. I shall explore to what extent DOGME 95 can be interpreted as an act of oppositional criticism to the sinful and empty professionalism of mainstream film.

Interpretation of the rules

Creative production is often interpreted as one of the revelatory aspects of the human spirit. If we open up a task we tend to get more divergent outcomes. If we closely define a task we tend to get more rigid results. DOGME like Oulipo Literature and Chiptune Music is a great example of the creative potential of limitations.

Although it may appear that DOGME 95 artists are merely conforming to a set of rigid rules, I shall demonstrate how the artists found original and creative interpretations to the problems posed by the manifesto.

In DOGME 95 uniformity is stressed, the uniformity is provided by the ten rules. Von Trier explains:

“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. 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”¹²

The manifesto’s claims to uniformity were hard to attain. The initial four films of the Danish Directors all take unique/individual approaches and appear to be the works of four distinct directors.

Lars Von Trier notes:

“Yes, it’s very easy to see whose made what. That’s the paradox. We talk about putting films into uniform and we create uniform rules, but the paradox is- and this is also the point- that the first three DOGME films very much reflect the individual directors. It’s amusing that this should be the case, but then why talk of uniformity as destroying the individual qualities. That’s precisely what hasn’t happened”¹³

The claims to uniformity was crushed by the individual interpretation of the rules, and the degrees to which the directors transgressed from these rules. As Lars Von Trier notes:

“for me the interesting thing was watching the various interpretations of the rules, maybe others will choose to attach importance to some new aspects”¹⁴

Lars Von Trier explains (below) why he wished to place deliberate limitations upon

the film making process.

“Control and chaos were the conceptual corner stones of my artistic strategy. A renewed authenticity and spontaneity an attempt to regain control over the technical apparatus of film. At one level the DOGME rule emerged from a desire to submit to the authority and rules. In a normal film production you might be hampered by having to make a decision about and control an infinite number of things such as filters and colours. The DOGME rules basically say that you mustn’t do any of this...but the whole idea of the rules is that we, in setting limits to the freedom, enhance freedom within circumscribed limits”¹⁵

Thomas Vinterbug elaborates the control theory

“The clearer you define a task for yourself, the more fun you have accomplishing it. That’s what the entire DOGME project is about. If the DOGME rules specify that no sound effects can be used, then you left with only your volume knob to work with, and suddenly theres a whole world in that knob. Suddenly that volume control allows you to evoke a wide range of different moods. In that sense it’s very inspiring. Jorgan Leth once said to me “in restriction lies the greatest source of inspiration” and I think I’ve shown that to be true with Festern.”¹⁶

The difficulty in following the dogmatic rules of the manifesto is that the strict rules are ironically hugely subjective. I shall analyse some of the rules below and explore the challenges that DOGME 95 directors faced in realising their creative aims.

We can break the manifesto into two distinct strands to gain an understanding of the directors intentions. The two themes aim to create realism through a) minimising film production concerns and b) creating strict unified content and scripts which reduce artifice. See table below for further reference.

Film Production	Content
• Rule 1: Shooting must be done on location	Rule 6: the film must not contain superficial action
• Rule 2: The sound must never be approached apart from the images of vice versa	Rule 7: temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden
• Rule 3: The camera must be handheld	Rule 8: Genre movies are forbidden
• Rule 4: The film must be in colour	Rule 10: The director must not be credited
• Rule 5: Optical workers and filters are forbidden	
• Rule 9: The film format must be Academy 35mm”	

I shall now analyse each rule in the manifesto and whether they were effective in

delivering an alternative to standardised Hollywood production techniques.

Minimised Film Production to achieve realism

My initial focus shall be the 6 rules that minimise film production aspects (to achieve realism).

- Rule 1: Shooting must be done on location
- Rule 2: The sound must never be approached apart from the images of vice versa
- Rule 3: The camera must be handheld
- Rule 4: The film must be in colour
- Rule 5: Optical workers and filters are forbidden
- Rule 9: The film format must be Academy 35mm¹⁷

RSW explains that DOGME 95's six rules aim to reduce the artifice of modern film making:

“each element here is intended to make the film look as natural and therefore honest as possible. No lights, no filters, no change of field of focus or artificial mounting of the camera. It was supposed to place as few technical barriers as possible between the events on the set and the audience in the cinema”¹⁸

Rule 1: Shooting must be done on location

Rule 1 aims to reduce the reliance on artificial sets. In *Sunset Boulevard* William Holden and Nancy Olsen walk through a bare empty Hollywood lot at night and mediate on the empty artifice of the sets and props. Nancy proclaims “look at this street, all cardboard, all phoney, all hollow, all done with mirrors, but you know I like it better than any street I know”. As audiences we have been conditioned to accept certain conditions of film making and have grown accustomed to consuming films that re-produce a set of standardised expectations. DOGME 95 aims to frustrate and re-define common definitions of good and bad film making.

Rule 2: The sound must never be approached apart from the images of vice versa

Rule 2 aims to achieve a unity between sound and image. It reduces the directors traditional reliance on overdub to mask fluffed lines. The use of stock film music to evoke push button emotional knee jerk reactions is prohibited. DOGME 95 forces directors to convey emotion through strong live emotional performances. This reduces the perfectionist tendency to alter recordings in post-production.

Lars Von Trier explores how the constraints of using consumer camcorders made him approach sound and film in a different way:

“In the forest scene we had to mike up a tree to capture the ambient sound...it is like re-inventing movie making, don't you see bring the ambience forward instead of the sound of the scene itself is a common simple affect but now it suddenly became difficult to achieve because the decisions had to be taken on the spot. A load of cinematic effects that otherwise seem easy or cheap suddenly become difficult

again...can't you hear that this is only right way of doing it? I was thrilled to bits after that day in the woods. It was like returning to the poetry I encountered when I began making films as a child"¹⁹

Instead of using pre-recorded music Von Trier was now faced with manipulating live sources:

"We used a harmonica, the kind you could buy through Mickey Mouse magazine in the old days, and simply installed the harmonica player where we needed scenes with music. In the forest scene he stood in the forest with a microphone as we took the scene, and the sound engineer mixed the music and speech as we shot. When we do the closing credits tomorrow, he will play the same way while we are filming them"²⁰

Von Trier explains that in *The Idiots* due to musical limitations he was able to focus more upon the actors/cast:

"When it says you must haven't any music in the film...This kind of limit generates many ideas. The characteristic feature of the DOGME 95 films is that they very quickly become group portraits. There is more pathos, because if you cannot lay on all the subtle emotions and amplify them by using background music, you have to trumpet them out through what is left, which means the cast"²¹

Kristian Levring talks of the emotive effects of refraining from music in film:

"In my case, I have chosen to refrain from music altogether...When I saw *Festen* I found it liberating that there was no music. If it had been given the big violin treatment, which had been very easy to do with that film, the experience had not been the same- when you are told to get emotional, its different than when you are just plain emotional. That's why I find that background music is being completely misused-now its dramatic, so we hear the dark cello, or now we want some action, so we add some heavy rock"²²

Rule 3: The camera must be hand held

Rule 9: The film format must be academy 35mm

Initially the DOGME 95 manifesto insisted that participants submit film on academy 35mm. Film Critic RSW believes that the brotherhoods issued this clause "to remove options from the director. Different film stock have different colour tones and different proportions which can effect the mood and reaction of the audience"²³

Orson Welles in 'A touch of evil' took pomposity to it's limits through opening with a three minute and twenty second tracking shot (through the use of elaborate cranes and pulleys). A shot that ironically removes the viewer from the action rather than immersing them in the storyline. The shot is highly revered yet illustrates how stylised production has been historically favoured over the simplicity of good storytelling. In DOGME 95 the manifesto states that the camera used must be handheld. The idea being that the director would not be distracted by gimmicky shots and focus on engaging dramatic action.

Although Von Trier initially conceived of using 35mm for filming he later conceded to using Mini DV Cameras (for reasons of practicality). Academy 35mm was an expensive format and camera men complained of straining themselves handling weighty equipment. The transition from 35mm to consumer camera caused unforeseen ethical dilemmas due to the extra pre-production facilities available on handheld consumer cameras (not covered in the manifesto).

The transition from 35mm to camcorder evoked Schriedeger's theory of interventionism. As scientists such as Schriedeger note "if you take a measure of something you are affectively altering the thing you are measuring". Schriedeger proposed that if you put a cat in a box with a radioactive source you would only know if the cat was dead or alive unless you opened the box (and thus your overall measurement has changed due to intervention).

The substitution of a camera with no pre-production facilities to a piece of equipment with a huge array of self-regulating and correcting mechanisms contravened the manifestos maxim of making active aesthetic choices (and also undermined the manifestoes notions of realism).

Lars Von Trier explains:

"The problem with video is that it gives you a thousand possibilities not covered by the rules. You can manipulate during the recording phase the same way that you can do it at the later stage using film- you can colour grade and other fantastic things."²⁴

To an extent the brothers side stepped this argument by allowing the self correcting facilities to do the work for them. This meant they did not have to make any aesthetic decisions. Von Trier elaborates below:

"Therefore Thomas and I had a long discussion about our position on these matters- for instance white balance we agreed on setting to automatic. At least then we hadn't made an aesthetic choice in using various white balances to give different tones of colour. Many of the rules are after all designed to rob the director of his power over these things. To get something from the surroundings in instead of forcing it out of them"²⁵

Thomas Vinterburg felt the use of handheld cameras helped spark a grassroots film making revolution:

"Your meant to use what you've got and not lie about it, which is an admirable ambition. And whether its intentional or not, and whether its intentional or not, DOGME has made people realise that its possible to make film themselves, using technology that's available in Dixons on the high street"²⁶

Jean Marc Barr's (Director of *The Lovers*) explains how DOGME 95 low budget philosophy encouraged him to take unprecedented risks.

"If we'd shot *The Lovers* on film, in the standard way it would have taken maybe two

and a half months and cost about five million dollars. But shooting digital, we found we could reduce the budget to one fifth, one sixth of a normal film. That was a big deal. we could work freely with the knowledge that we weren't risking our necks if it didn't work out. Whereas a lot of 1st time film makers today get their 5 million dollar budget, knowing that if it doesn't work out then they've got to go and work at MacDonalds"²⁷

Thomas Vinterburg explains:

"Usually directors accept a low budget without taking the consequences, and try to shoehorn a big film into a small frame, which is suicidal every time. It's just compromise. Whereas DOGME enabled us to see a way of fighting the usual low budgets- you can turn them into an advantage"²⁸

Using consumer camcorders embed the film making process with a sense of immediacy and energy, Jean Marc Barr recalls:

"with DV, instead of shooting one sequence a day at the most, we could shoot four or five...also yr. very mobile: instead of having thirty people on set you have seven on the crew."²⁹

This immediacy of technique, allowed films to be produced quicker and cheaper and more efficiently than traditional film production. Vinterburg comments:

"I did opt for a certain method that was to ensure that things emerged more or less spontaneously. I didn't spend any time preparing and having observed the actors during rehearsals. I made sure to rely on my intuitions when conveying what I was after to Anthony"³⁰

A factor unique to DIY technologies is a sense of intimacy and personal expression. Jean Marc Barr recounts:

"What we wanted to make with this film was a film that would touch people, and have an emotional intimacy that the previous technology didn't have"³¹

Kristian Levring notes how the handheld approach liberated the actors:

"But the handheld cameras has a very important function. In that it gives the actors an immense freedom. When you have rehearsed the scene, you place the cameras accordingly. You can adjust all the time the actors don't have to keep their marks and that gives an enormous freedom. And when you use the tiny video cameras the actors don't really think about them- it gives them their space, as an instructor it presents you with so many gifts that I had never dreamt of. They have to think about where they are standing- they just have to try and be their characters and if they feel like turning round, hey do it! For me that was a great plus"³²

Rule 4: The film must be in colour

Black and White film is often used to convey an mood in independent film. To many

first time directors Black and White film is a high art fetish. There are many pretensions of value associated with Black and White which DOGME 95 hoped to circumvent. Soren Kragh Jacobsen claims the brotherhood chose not to shoot in black and white due to the aesthetics associated with the stock:

“The film must be in colour that is the fourth rule because there is no questioning that a black and white film gives a kind of aesthetics”³³

Rule 5: Optical work and filters are forbidden

In the Hammer production *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* Director Freddie Francis uses an unsettling kaleidoscopic sunset filter to convey the terror of Dracula. This motif re-enforces dread and suspense. Acting and dramatisation play second fiddle to the mechanics of cinema itself.

Soren Kragh Jacobsen discusses the need to prove himself without the security of filters:

“Without filters. I felt I had to prove that within these rules you could actually make something different. So, for example, I talked to my cameraman and told him “you have to make it handheld, but you should try to make it as still as possible. It does not mean because your shooting handheld the camera should be like that all the time [he mimes shaking the camera around]”³⁴

In shooting the Saharan production *The King is Alive* Kristian Levring discusses the experience of waiting for the correct light to film (instead of relying on filters in the process of post production). Although this increased the naturalism of the film it proved impractical in extreme conditions:

“We did wait a lot for light. When the light was really right, I would try to work out [the takes] so the scene was really good when the light was right”³⁵

Soren Kragh Jacobsen claims this cause was detrimental to his creative process and caused wastage. The director had to edit out many scenes of the film due to bad lighting, but also had to bend the rules during filming:

“I can guarantee you that there are scenes in *Mifune* which I have edited out because of the absence of filters”³⁶

He also discusses a moment when he had to digress from the rules in order to fit the story, which raises the ethical friction between fiction and reality in the film making process- The director confesses the following:

“In *Mifune* I had to cover the windows on the farm for lighting purposes. Yes well there isn’t anything in the rules that literally prohibits that, but in principle it is a form of lighting. I could of course have chosen not to give a stuff about aesthetics and say well simply do this night scene while the light is pouring in through the windows, but suddenly that offended me professionally”³⁷

Focused content rules to reduce artifice

The other four DOGME rules relate to the content of the film and focus on techniques of realism:

- “Rule 6: The film must not contain superficial action
- Rule 7: temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden
- Rule 8: genre movies are forbidden
- Rule 10: the director must not be credited”³⁸

In relation to film content the manifesto states:

“Predictability 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.”³⁹

Below I have analysed the four content rules and explored whether they have been effective in reducing artifice and enforcing realistic principles.

Rule 6: the film must not contain superficial action

Many modern day hollywood films like *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* are compromised by an over-reliance on special FX at the expense of dramatic plotting and content. The rule is difficult to follow because it is in itself unrealistic rather than naturalistic. As RSW points out:

“Firstly it limits action: murders do happen, as do assaults and attacks. Indeed western was built around the revelation of crime. It seems peculiar that certain aspects of real life are to be shown or discussed but not others, particularly those at the greatest extremes of human experience”⁴⁰

Incidentally this is a rule that two of the four DOGME films don't obey (i.e the murder and suicide scenarios acted out in the *King is Alive* and the sexual scenarios in *The Idiots*).

Rule 7: Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden

In Hollywood films flashbacks are used as plot devices. Viewers are left to piece together plot elements in non-linear fashion. This is an example of when the mechanics of film production disrupt and frustrate the purity of the story telling process.

Rule 8: Genre movies are not acceptable

In the novel *Script Generator* Phillippe Vasset predicts that an Orwellian software algorithm could superseded the formulaic output of the entire entertainment industry. He explores the universal fondness for cultural convention and to what extent we crave convention and semiotic codes to make sense of the world around us. The author predicts that the program would operate by genre “with approval of the

marketplace: romance, adventure, suspense, horror, 'arthouse', detective, drama, etc. Bookshops and video shops already use these categories. In fact, the consumer already shows a preference for categorising by genre because it provides prior-to purchase information on the contents...buying a thriller is unambiguous"⁴¹

The extract above illustrates that producing a film to genre can produce stock movie conventions (that stress artifice over dramatic realism).

To some extent genre movies are unavoidable. *Julien Donkey Boy* could easily be interpreted as a surreal family drama, *Festen* has the trappings of a simple morality based family drama and *The Idiots* resembles a comical satire.

Kristin Levring talks of the possibility of DOGME becoming a genre in itself:

"I have thought a great deal about not being allowed to make a genre movie-rule number eight. It's a very difficult rule. You have the obvious genres, westerns, film noir and then you have things like the French Cinema which has become a genre because the films always take place in cafes at night. In my opinion you can talk about a genre when movies start to refer to other similar movies. Which gives you the problem in that DOGME then runs the risk of becoming a genre of its own. That is why I have tried to make a film that doesn't look like the three others, so that we won't get a DOGME genre- I think that is really important"⁴²

As the actor Lone Scherfig notes:

"The more I work with dome the more it appears to me that DOGME itself is a genre. And the more DOGME films that are made, the more you have to fight them, otherwise they'll become the system too"⁴³

On being asked if DOGME was a genre in itself Thomas Vinterburg said the following:

"In a way its too late. Or maybe you should write DOGME is dead. The explanation is simple that DOGME is turning into convention exactly like the conventions we tried to avoid, and that is end initiatives like this must come to. Once, bring a camera out not the street was a revolution- that's no longer the case. The handheld camera was a revolution once-now its driving everybody crazy."⁴⁴

Rule 10: The director must not be credited

Rule 10 states that the "director must not be credited". The anonymity of the director was hard to realise across the board due to media coverage. This rule raises questions surrounding "individual expressivity as the very basis for significant art"⁴⁵

Directors are fashionable commodities that are bought and traded for cultural prestige. Hipsters drop names to sound knowledgeable and trendy. Aspiring middle class dinner party attendees drop names as a form of elitist cultural signifying. They are superior because they went to University and know the right names to drop. We appreciate art in the same way we appreciate brands. Seeing films free from cultural

association makes us evaluate our former knowledge and evaluate our own prejudices. The director has always been the seat of power in the film crew. This clause renounces this power and re-imagines the dynamics of film making.

Trier explains:

“There is something healthy about the idea of not crediting the directors, for it is the work that matters not the man behind it. Specifying all those things that the directors aren’t allowed to do is in itself a provocation, and the business of not allowing the directors to be credited was like a punch in the face of all directors. I quite liked that”⁴⁶

He finds the act of denying directorship liberating:

“I felt that it was quite noble to submit to the idea of the film being more important than whoever made it. I am sure that it was difficult to accept for many people that the name is not on the reel! It is about seeking some form of truth- that this truth is more important than whatever honour it might give you later”⁴⁷

Thomas Vinterburger interprets the denouncement of the director as a Dada-esque anti-art statement:

“The idea behind it is of a very symbolic nature- that we renounce our roles as artists, aesthetes. Focus should not be on our personal works, it is the registration of what goes on in front of us that is important. We have never been able to play the game of keeping us a secret, and it would conflict with the idea of regarding ourselves as missionaries. All the media hype surrounding the project has had the effect that we desired-to send out a provocation.”⁴⁸

RSW sees the inconsistencies in this act of criticism:

“Why not? After all without a director there is no film. The act of creation of a film is one of will, of saying that who will and wont be there., of when one will and will not turn the camera on, of what one will shoot and what one will ignore. To suggest that there is no director seems nonsensical and also baffling undercut as a philosophical conviction by the fact that every director involved in a DOGME 95 project has told everybody about it. It also misses the pivotal fact that the only reason that the film is being made as a DOGME 95 project is because the director decided to do so.”⁴⁹

Subclause: Refrain from Aesthetics

The subclauses of the manifesto invites participants to refrain from good taste and aesthetics. Von Trier explains his reasoning below:

“Film production has always been shrouded in a veil of mystery. Studios artists and production environments have done all they can to remain inaccessible to outsiders”⁵⁰.

He attributes this to the early history of cinema :

“These attitudes can probably be traced back to the days when the moving image was equated with magic. As everyone knows the magicians secrets must be kept, or there lack of obscured”⁵¹.

The director continues:

“We cannot permit these developments to take place in dusty rooms, behind closed doors; nor can we leave them in the hands of the chosen few!”⁵²

Trier wishes to democratise film making:

“Fortunately technological progress is on our side. In the old days you could hide behind a mountain of expensive equipment, behind insurmountable financial obstacles. In those days you could point out with a certain amount of accuracy the medium was such a costly affair that it was not for the man on the street. Today progress is undermining this argument. Soon everybody will be able to produce on cheap but fully professional equipment...We must open things up...nothing less. Freedom of information must be a minimum demand”⁵³

In the DOGME Manifesto the brotherhood advocate DIY aesthetics as an antidote to the illusion, trickery and gloss of commercial cinema, Lars Von Trier develops this idea below:

“Film has become very much like magic tricks- your not supposed to know how it is done, which is also very old fashioned, especially if you think about the new techniques, the new cameras, and how everyone can produce their own films, which I think is fantastic. So it's about time there was a real debate. Nobody has talked about film form or content not for many, many years and the arrival of these techniques makes it a very good time to have that discussion”⁵⁴

The director is asked too concentrate on realism and truth rather than focussing on aesthetic considerations. This statement has two faults a] the idea of a universal truth being attributed to a work of art is highly debatable and b) interpretations change from viewer to viewer.

On the implausibility of the DOGME manifestos claim to abandoning film aesthetics Soren Jacobsen comments:

“For me the most difficult thing was the aesthetic bit. Even though we all claim to refrain from any form of aesthetics, the moment you choose one picture, you choose not to use another, and that is an aesthetic choice. I think I can say that I find it difficult to look myself straight in the eye and say I am not creating a picture. It is a work of art. You are not depicting reality. As soon as you direct an actor and you have written a script, you are not depicting reality. I think that has been the hard thing for me and I can see that its also been the case for the others. Because I have written a script chosen some actors and created some pictures. I have decided that the camera should be placed here and film it”⁵⁵

Harmony Korine agrees:

“I don’t see what kind of movie isn’t aesthetic. I mean either the aesthetics are appealing or they are not”⁵⁶

Perhaps its best to conclude with Kristian Levring, that the DOGME films are not anti aesthetic yet contain aesthetics utilised by the very technology they are using:

“Nothing in the idiots that makes you think what a fab shot, but that’s just Lars taste right now, not wanting to make shots like that. That’s still an aesthetic viewpoint. It’s too banal a lie to say that, just because you make something anti-aesthetic, its divorced from aesthetics”⁵⁷

Thomas Vinterburg consider that the DOGME manifesto possesses aesthetics in its own right:

“I actually had a very precise stubborn idea of the kind of look that I was after. What happened very concretely in the case of *Festen* was first of all that I experienced real irritation at not being able to cultivate a visual aesthetic because the DOGME rules literally prohibit that. Secondly, it turned out that in following the rules were were generating something that resembled an aesthetic in it’s own right, and as a result I virtually didn’t have to think about that aspect of the film.”⁵⁸

Conclusion

The DOGME back catalogue has left a lasting legacy which has challenged the professional values of the film industry and returned cinema to it’s theatre roots. It has challenged creeping ideological bankruptcy of film makers who see independent film as “resume builders to get noticed at Sundance and a job in Hollywood- or a means to an end to get the next Batman movie”⁵⁹

The digital revolution has allowed directors an infinite array of stylised effects and options which can be applied effortlessly through standardised editing packages such as Final Cut Pro. The manifesto emphasises the fact that student directors are forced to innovate due to a lack of budget and sophisticated equipment. It implies that Hollywood films fail to match the energy and passion of these films due to their inherent over-production. Time and time again as movie goes we are disappointed by an industry which favours slick editing and CGI FX over raw passion and innovation. DOGME 95 offered an alternative to the slick, glossy professionalism of Hollywood production line film making. DOGME stripped film making bare and we saw what directors where capable of (using everyday tools).

Soren Kragh Jacobsen identifies the need for DOGME 95’s denial of Hollywoods big budget philosophy:

“The technicians were kings, you know? And very often I felt as if they were stepping on my domain, stepping over my job. Of course, you have an authority as a director, but at the same time your not completely sure that they’re not right. So suddenly you had more flags for the light, and more advanced microphones, more cranes, more

tracks. And very often I'd find myself standing there, having spent so long rehearsing my actors, motivating them, creating that secure platform in front of the camera- because that's what it's all about. And then I'd hear, it looks lovely. But just give us one more hour with the lights"⁶⁰

Lars Von Trier elaborates:

"When a film director make a film it quite automatically gets done in a particular way. You have thirty people around you, lots of lighting and all that, which has to be planned ages in advance. It's a large ponderous machine. The result is a particular kind of film and this imposes limits on Danish film, I think. So 1995 was an obvious time to try and shake oneself out of all of that in some way and explore what can actually be done with the really basic qualities of film. To me it was so beautifully consistent I like that"⁶¹

He reveals his contempt for the perfectionist nature of Hollywood filmmaking:

"For many years now, every technical invention that's come along in film has had one purpose and that is to smooth things out. So you make a film and then you go to the lab and you put same old filter on, so it's the same kind of bluish light in all the scenes- because otherwise it won't look real. But what is real if you look at something from one and its one colour you look at it in another and its another colour. But if you have experience in the medium even just as a viewer then you know your still in the same room. But all these rules about axis and so on which I don't use any more their still hanging around from silent films. And of course since then people have been trained to watch films like that so of course there has to be a new film language"⁶²

DOGME 95's philosophy proved to be useful tool for directors to regain their spontaneity and resulted in better communication between actors and the crew. All movies were notable for having strong narratives and a punchy emotional impact.

The movies work on the ideal that "the more expensive the movie the more wilful its estrangement from real life as lived"⁶³. An acute sense of realism combined with scripts of biting and controversial nature makes the social message behind the films seem all the more potent. The realism techniques in *The Idiots* have led many to claim that the film is "mocking the afflicted". Von Trier considers this accusation to be misplaced "especially when so called 'well made, tasteful films do nothing but mock reality constantly, you know killing people, and then having a good laugh about it"⁶⁴

Lars Von Trier contemplates how the realism in *The Idiots reaches towards* existentialism:

"*The Idiots* is a more complex far weirder film, a film you ought to be amused and moved by, but also a bit disturbed by. The film contains a dangerousness because it juggles with the concept of normalcy with the way we ought to and ought not to behave. And if one evaluates rationality, the world tends to fall apart"⁶⁵

The Idiots is a film that confronts bourgeois normality in the restaurant scene where

The Idiots literally drool over food and lurch around tables absconding serviettes to the bemusement of puzzled guests, we see Trier attacking the hypocrisy of civilised society:

“Inside everyone is an inner idiot, what do you do about a society which is becoming richer and richer but where know-one is happier his response is to play the idiot the key to helping let the inner idiot out”⁶⁶

In *The Idiots* the audience is purposely subject to a freer and more instinctive approach to film making, one that ignores the formalities of professionalism. We see “shots go in and out of focus, cameramen jutting in the view scope of the second camera, a non separation of sound and image, jump cuts, a DVC camera man trailing Stoffer”⁶⁷. [Trier] “So you see a lot of of mikes. And you see cameras. And thats fine with me. You know I’m very sure you could easily make a film where you see a lot of cameras all the time and the audience wouldn’t mind”⁶⁸

Researcher R.J North explains how *The Idiots* rejection of traditional production techniques has improved Lars Von Triers film making technique:

“This anti style leaves the view with nothing else but the performances, so you are immediately drawn into the story”⁶⁹. Von Trier has clearly “in the span of two feature films [breaking the waves-idiots] has gone from one stream to another, from the complete prioritisation of the technical look of the film to the absolute prioritisation of the performance of the actors”⁷⁰

Thomas Vinterburg explains that by abandoning burdensome production sets he was able to give actors a greater sense of freedom:

“The result is improvisation and tremendous sense of release, but all within a carefully circumscribed framework, because a film is, of course, all the more inspiring to make if the basic production parameters have been clearly defined. That’s obvious and anyone who is involved with something that resembles film making just slightly knows this. The same holds for interviews the more precise the questions are the more precise are the answers”⁷¹

Kristian Levring talks of the time he was able to spend with the characters filming DOGME style:

“It was so easy to get ready for a scene that after we rehearsed that scene with the actors, it took maybe only twenty minutes before we had the cameras ready apposed to normally where it would take maybe three or four hours. In that way we could actually get to the heart of the matter and could spend four or five hours on the actual scene. And because to was relatively quick getting everything ready we could do many of the scenes again. If I felt they could get better, we would return the next day after having slept on it. I might have made a few small changes and then it could take us perhaps an hour and a half to do the scene one last time which nearly always gave a dramatically improved result.”⁷²

In *The Idiots* Lars Von Trier was able to concentrate much deeper with his actors

than ever before, to the extent that it was like therapy:

“He really wanted it like therapy, to dig in me like a person. This sort of method acting is one way to work (but I wouldn’t want to work like that all the time). You would burn out”⁷³

Soren Kragh Jacobsen elaborates:

“I regarded DOGME as a course of treatment programme straight away because I wouldn’t want to be on a treatment programme all the time-but maybe in ten years time. For a mid career director like myself (with maybe five films left) it is the best cure if you have ever thought what happened to my spontaneity? After all it works and I am certainly going to bring with me some of the things I have learnt to my next thing. More acting give the across the room they need and truly follow them instead of making them follow us. To create the dynamics, the spontaneity, the freshness which Mifune has- as you can see up there on the big screen”⁷⁴

RSW questions it’s usefulness as a training tool for directors:

“the directorial experience will be far closer to that of stage acting than of screen work (and so its worth is questionable)”⁷⁵

Although the DOGME manifesto is essentially flawed and contains as many contradictions as it does answers, it has at least opened up debates about film production and the role of realism in film. Whether the artists themselves were looking for a purifying film experience [Jacobsen] naked film [Vinterburger], or to regain lost innocence [Trier] DOGME has pathed the way for new outlooks on contemporary cinema.⁷⁶

Thomas Vinterburg discusses how DOGME has become absorbed into mainstream culture (and the new phenomena of DOGME commercials and DOGME architecture):

“People don’t seem to have picked up the idea in the way I hoped. I was hoping it would create a polemical atmosphere and provoke people to do something of consequence, maybe even contrary to DOGME- to make huge films, say, just to show you can do them another way too. But that doesn’t seem to have happened here. In fact DOGME seems to have become almost a convention in itself, within Danish culture: now they talk about DOGME architecture, DOGME commercials. In the commercials industry you get this very expensive bad lighting to look like DOGME. I mean thats not the point. The point is to get angry and do something different. The point is to reflect the movie business as it is- not to just give it another colour. But in some peoples minds, DOGME just means handheld films you know”⁷⁷

He claims that DOGME has just become another preset way of thinking of genre:

“And because I know that in the advertising business they are now lighting in a special way to make it as ugly and as DOGME like as possible. And I can see that we now have a different kind of auto pilot- you simply press a DOGME button, and in

a way that disappoint me a little. The idea in my eyes was to provoke some people into saying: look at what you can get out of a lamp. Look at what you can do with a big set. In a way I feel that a lot of people have just fallen in line without really thinking about what they are doing- I must admit I had hoped that the provocation would have the opposite affect.”⁷⁸

Since DOGME’s inception handheld DIY films have become box office best sellers. Films such as *Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* have used DOGME-esque techniques to deliver believable chills. The video tape becomes documentary evidence, the audience is witness to supernatural shaky cam testimonies to the supernatural. The terror is in the drama and storytelling and not the special FX or trickery.

Lars Von Trier contemplates the future legacy of DOGME 95 below:

“I would find it amusing if DOGME 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 distinction. You’d then take a little DOGME pill and feel much better afterwards, because you’d be grounded again. I also think that DOGME could provide an amusing form of discipline if it could exist as a kind of test that even the experienced directors would have to take now and again, but I don’t know what will happen to the DOGME concept. I’ve only seen those three films, but in my opinion they’re all much too respectable. Mine is too. That wasn’t my intention, but its knotholes the case, in part because it was tampered with. Now it’s not quite as respectable. We’ve now produced a copy without optical manipulation, but the difference isn’t that great.”⁷⁹

Below the Vinterburg discusses the DOGME manifesto in the context of a training exercise:

“One of the basic ideas in all this is to create renewal, and if you just repeat that renewal then your really back were you started. So I wouldn’t be able to make a DOGME film now. I would find it claustrophobic and repetitive- I know how it is done. My way of combatting that is making something extravagant and spectacular next time”⁸⁰

The problem with grass movements such as DOGME is that the quality can be variable due to their open nature. The abandonment of classical technique recalls Pablo Picasso’s maxim: “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.”⁸¹ Jean Marc Barr concludes:

“I don’t think anyone can do it. You need a love for cinema, and a sensitivity to it. and you still have to have real discipline: it’s still like preparing a regular film.”⁸²

Genres such as Punk and DOGME bring art into the hands of the disadvantaged, the ones that can’t afford the latest flash technology (thus reducing the social/money related elitism of artistic production). As Paul Frietag points out:

“Future DOGME projects have some rather large shoes to fill following *The Idiots*

and *Festern*. In the future it seems likely that this movement will begin to turn out a lot more curiosities than real masterpieces before it tapers off”⁸³

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