How can film art proceed?

Festen (Celebration), a film by Thomas Vinterberg, and the Dogme 95 event at the London Film Festival

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A notable feature of the recent 42nd London Film Festival was the cynical response of many contemporary filmmakers to the crisis of artistic vision currently afflicting not just the cinema but all art forms. It was truly depressing to read the catalogue of new British films, for example, desperate to make money at the box-office by saying as little as possible in the 'right' stylistic manner.

Rather than the medium being used as a vehicle for artistic expression, cinema is widely seen as a self-perpetuating set of templates for further cinema. The images get shallower each time, but the producers continue to use them until any residual meaning has faded to nothing. Any addressing of serious matters is seen as peripheral to cinema's real purpose, which is making the right moves.

I am not necessarily advocating a dogged and relentless realism, nor am I opposed to clever camera-work per se. What I am opposed to is its use as a means of avoiding rather than achieving expression. One of the more interesting events of the festival, therefore, was the appearance of members of the Dogme 95 group to coincide with the screening of the first Dogme-certificated film, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen*.

Dogme 95 is a group of Danish directors, pre-eminently Lars von Trier and Vinterberg. To challenge themselves as filmmakers they adopted a set of 10 rules, 'The Vow of Chastity'. These rules must be kept in order to qualify for the Dogme certificate, although they do not prevent signatories to the Vow from making other non-Dogme films.

The 10 rules are largely concerned with technical form:

1: Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary, 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 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 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 can 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, the film takes place here and now.)

8: Genre movies are not acceptable.

9: Film format is Academy 35mm.

10: The director must not be credited. Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all means available and at the cost of any good taste and aesthetic considerations.

As was pointed out at the Dogme event, some of these rules are fairly straightforward, and some of them are more symbolic than practical. (Vinterberg was asked about the anonymity of the director given that 'We all know who you are'. 'The rules,' he said, 'are for the making of films, not their marketing. We can't control the whole business.') Some of the rules, moreover, are open to broad interpretation. What matters, according to the director of the Dogme 4 Kristian Levring, is not whether you agree with the rules but whether you live with them. In a short documentary by Sophie Fiennes, von Trier says, 'Every director has rules.' For all of the Dogme directors, in fact, the rules seem almost arbitrary: the 'sport of Dogme 95,' as Vinterberg put it, is 'inventing what you can do within the restraints.' (He went on to argue that a dubbed Italian version of *Festen* should have its certificate withdrawn for breaking rule two on the use of non-contemporaneous sound.) For Soren Kragh Jacobsen, director of Dogme 3, *Mifune's Last Song*, 'it would be possible to break all the rules but it wouldn't be fun film-making.'

Jacobsen also spoke at length of the Dogme rules restoring a sense of filmmaking as a social activity. He was vigorously supported by Henning Moritsen, the star of *Festen*, who argued that Dogme gave actors more time and responsibility. He described it as a more theatrical method of working. From all of this, it is clear that Dogme is not prescriptive. It has a tendency to put more emphasis on actors' performances. It militates against rapid cutting within each scene because of the need for sound continuity. The main aim of the group seems to be to make filmmakers more aware of what they are doing.

When Levring flippantly commented that the only opposition to Dogme had come from the cameramen and propmakers it had left unemployed, Vinterberg pointed out that the more thoughtful of them welcomed it because they 'know that if you reflect and then you put a lamp on a scene, say, you'll have a reason for it.' Levring perhaps summed its limited aims up best: 'If you look at films all over the world they're made in a similar way. Any possibility of breaking those industrial methods is worth trying.'

This leaves Dogme 95 with quite a fine balancing act. There is clearly a danger that their film-making could degenerate into primitivism for its own sake, that it could get as bogged down in its own technical simplicity as Hollywood blockbusters are in their sophistication. At the event it was quite clear that most of the audience saw the experiment primarily in formal-technical terms: the question of what films one should make using these rules did not arise. At the moment, however, the Dogme group is using the Vow as a means to an end, and is quite clear on the differences between their rules and the films that result. When the critic Jonathan Romney suggested that it has not yet made a film that could not have been made outside Dogme 95, Kristian Levring responded robustly, 'But they wouldn't have been as good films!'

Vinterberg's Dogme 1 *Festen* offered a good chance to see what can be

done working to the Vow of Chastity. It is the 60th birthday weekend for Helge (Henning Moritsen) at his hotel out in the country. The family assembles. There is his youngest son Michael, with his wife, Mette, and children. Michael was not actually invited because of his unruly behaviour when drunk. There are Helge's flirtatious daughter Helene and his eldest son Christian, back from Paris for the occasion.

The party follows some months after the suicide of Christian's twin sister, Linda. The film captures beautifully both the imperious role assigned to Helge as head of the household and the knowledge that the last previous family gathering was Linda's funeral.

From an almost home-movie feel of the guests arriving, the film gathers weight through its structure. It is a theatrical film, in many ways reminiscent of formal tragedy, with the central figure being forced to confront his true character.

Helge tries to persuade Christian to move back from Paris as 'I am getting old and I want my family around me.' We see Helene playing a game of 'getting warmer' in the room where Linda committed suicide, while in their separate rooms Michael argues with Mette and Christian ignores the overtures of one of the waitresses. The striking formality of the film is exemplified by this lengthy sequence. Michael and Mette make love brutally while Christian drifts into his reveries, but Helene searching Linda's room sustains the momentum. The denouement of the sequence, in some very sharply edited cuts, has revelation, movement and the building of tension. Helene seems to play a cruel trick by pretending to have found a note left by Linda; Michael slips on the soap in the shower and Christian falls asleep, dropping his whisky glass. As the shock appears to have subsided we discover that Helene did in fact find a note.

The film is closely scripted. We go from here to the dinner and the after-dinner speeches. Helge talks about when they first came to the hotel. He is followed by Christian who reveals that Helge used to bathe frequently. Before each bath he would undress Christian and Linda and rape them on his sofa. Christian proposes a toast to his clean father before leaving.

Christian's childhood friend Kim, the chef, encourages him to stay. After Helge says that he does not remember and perhaps they should call the police, Christian comes back to the table and proposes a toast to his father, 'To the man who killed my sister.' Kim hides the guests' car keys. Christian is tied up in the woods to prevent him returning to the party. Michael beats up a waitress whom he made pregnant at a previous birthday party. Helene's boyfriend, Gbatokai, arrives and is subject to racist abuse. Through all of this the family attempts to hang together and overcome the terrible truth that has been revealed at its core, but it is gradually unravelling. Helene reads Linda's note, in which she says that she will commit suicide because she has started dreaming that Helge is raping her again. This is the final element in the disintegration of the family, but it also marks the beginning of a new composition of the group as they recognize the truth about Helge.

The night ends with the disintegration. Helene and Gbatokai dance. Christian has a vision of Linda. He asks if he should join her and she tells him no. Michael drunkenly beats up Helge, and it is Helge's wife, Elsie, who has to fetch her other children to help. Breakfast the following morning sees the reconstituted family. Helge realises the way they all feel about him and makes a speech. What he did was unforgivable and they will hate him forever, he says, but they remain his children. Michael is presiding and asks him to go away so they can eat their breakfast. This time even Elsie will not stay with him.

The restrictions on camera work mean that, in the words of Vinterberg, 'there are huge feelings, huge pathos -- it's all left to the actors.' The cast are indeed excellent (Moritsen, something of a patriarch of Scandinavian theatre, said that the younger actors were better than they had ever been before) and the restraints on the film-making mean that the emotion does not have to be conveyed in competition with an overblown blockbusting style. It also means that the delineation of character can be conveyed through the characters themselves and is not artificially tacked on. The characters are thus truthfully created. When Michael finally realizes the truth about his father, for example, he does not thereby become a good man. He is the same man who has changed sides. This may well be the beginnings of making him a good man, but what we see is a realistic and convincing portrayal of an unstable individual facing up to some of the things that have contributed to his instability. Even where there is something jarring about the initial premise of the characters, they are executed entirely consistently within those premises.

Vinterberg does not preach about his characters. In Greek tragedy, the moment of realization comes for one character, who recognizes some mistake about themselves. Here the recognition comes for one character, but the impact on everybody else is what is important. (The social aspect of filmmaking was referred to several times at the Dogme 95 event and it is difficult not to see that as impacting on the storytelling here.)

Whilst he is interested in the individuals, Vinterberg's film is about the milieu, what he described as 'group portraits'. This is important because there is an awareness that these characters stand in some relation to each other and have very definite social responsibilities.

At the Dogme 95 event Kristian Levring, talking about how little storytelling has changed, described film as a 'conservative medium'. This is true enough, yet it seems perverse when Vinterberg has managed to adapt an even older, pre-film, style of storytelling to such powerful ends. The film is not entirely naturalistic (although visually the least naturalistic sequence, with Linda's spirit, is perhaps the least effective) but Vinterberg has used older forms to push cinema forward. Dogme 95, because of the limits to its ambitions, need not necessarily ever have had good results. That Vinterberg has achieved something of note here suggests that, in the hands of the right director, the Vow of Chastity can lead on to other futures for the cinema. It remains to be seen how the other Dogme films compare and whether their concerns are as vital as Vinterberg's. This is a beginning, and perhaps only a small one, but these are serious artists thinking about how best their art can proceed. That is a welcome development.

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