

Artistic and intellectual confusion in Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*

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The Idiots is the latest film made by Danish director Lars von Trier in line with the rules of the Dogma 95 group. The Dogma group was founded in 1995 by a handful of young Danish directors; its goals were discussed in a WSWs article of 28 November 1998 [<http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/nov1998/vin-n28.shtml>]. The group has established rules aimed at avoiding “artificial” effects. Its members restrict themselves to hand-held cameras, use no artificial lighting or tacked-on music, shoot no scenes out of sequence, etc. Von Trier refers to this as a sort of chastity belt.

While the rules of the Dogma group have obvious advantages for young directors seeking to make affordable films, the danger exists of a vice, i.e., the increasingly difficult struggle to find financing for films independent of the big companies, being transformed into a virtue—the notion that such basically primitive cinematic means are, in and of themselves, the best method for capturing and transposing reality onto the screen. In fact, intrinsic to the power of film as a medium is the multiplicity of ways it can comprehend, reflect and enhance the complexities of reality.

At any rate, von Trier's chastity belt is very much in evidence in *The Idiots*, with the shaky hand-held camera working as a sort of “alienation affect”; shots go in and out of focus and on occasion a cameraman juts into the viewscope of the second camera.

The Idiots deals with a group of actors and acquaintances of von Trier who under the leadership of Christopher (Stoffer) decide to take up arms against existing social norms by pretending to be “idiots—acting as mentally disabled persons. The Dogma rules lend the film a documentary character, but in fact *The Idiots* is based on a script written by the director (in four days!), and a number of Denmark's leading actors and actresses pop up in minor roles. The film features a number of scenes in which the “idiots” confront bourgeois

normality—for example, in a restaurant where two of their number drool over their food and lurch around the tables absconding with the serviettes of puzzled guests. One of the idiots clutches the hand of a solitary dinner guest, Karen, who feels empathy with the disabled and decides to accompany them.

Organised visits by the “disabled” and their caretakers follow—to a local factory and the public swimming pool. A group of “idiots” go from house to house in a well-to-do area, knock on doors and ask for money in exchange for crudely constructed pots of flowers. At one house the door is slammed in their face, at the second door they receive money from a grudging mother and her child. Frustrated by the response, Stoffer slips out of his role as “retarded” and declares that the group should give up the exercise and go home. At this point it is clear that this particular group of retarded persons have the luxury of being able to shed their disability and return to the ranks of everyday society when they want to.

In a handful of scenes the director seems to try to genuinely depict the feelings and emotions of intellectually retarded people faced with a climate of misunderstanding and hostility. More often the scenes are evidently designed to provoke—as when for example the “mentally retarded” Stoffer is asked what he wants for his birthday. Group sex, he retorts, and the scene is played out in an ugly and self-conscious fashion. On another occasion the group ramble abjectly through the woods and Stoffer ruminates on the aims of the group. “Inside everybody is an inner idiot.” He asks, “What do you do about a society which is becoming richer and richer, but where no one is happier?” His response is to “play the Idiot”. The idiot, he explains is the man of the future—the key to happiness is to liberate the inner idiot, to let the inner idiot out.

Von Trier is honest enough to show that the attempt to establish a sort of commune based on the principle of

revealing and releasing the inner idiot fails. Stoffer's demands on the group intensify. He asks them to leave the security of the group and act like idiots in their normal surroundings of work and family. The majority of the group (one explains he is a doctor, another gives lectures on art history) fail at this hurdle. A series of interviews with the actors at the conclusion of the film is interspersed with the action. Most of them declare their disillusionment with the whole project. Some want nothing more to do with the other members of the group.

Only the “normal” Karen who joined the group at the beginning and who, it becomes clear, has her own intense problems, declares her enthusiasm for the exercise. For her, experience with the group has brought liberation. The limitations of her “liberation” are made clear at the end of the film when she returns to her family, plays her part as an idiot and is duly rewarded with a sharp blow to the face by her husband. A close-up of her bloody face revealing an expression of vague self-satisfaction closes the film. The scene has an element of revelation. For the one who believed, there is a curious type of redemption.

Perhaps von Trier believes in his own small way that in Karen's plight he has found a modern-day equivalent to Joan of Arc. Amongst his own major influences von Trier lists the veteran Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer, who made his famous *The Passion of Joan of Arc* in 1927. Unfortunately, von Trier's presentation is infantile and shallow. One has the impression that the director has sought to defy and disrupt what he regards as bourgeois norms of behaviour and probity (and bourgeois ways of filmmaking) in the most provocative way possible. The result is messy and confused. At the same time the film evidently incorporates a number of autobiographical elements; to make sense of *The Idiots* it is useful to look more closely at the biography of its director.

In the *Guardian* a journalist notes that von Trier is the son of well-to-do parents who both worked for the social ministry in Copenhagen. His mother's job involved finding places to establish institutions for the mentally disabled, a fact which is directly echoed in a scene in *The Idiots*.

Von Trier's parents were political radicals in the 1960s who apparently used to take the young Lars on demonstrations and look on approvingly as he broke US embassy windows. Von Trier's split with his parents included a rejection of their political conceptions. Lars turned to Nietzsche, Strindberg and Bowie, and became increasingly attracted to the notion of faith. Along with Dreyer, another of von Trier's favourite film directors is

the late Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who in his later films descended increasingly into religious millenarianism.

One of von Trier's early films was the completion of a project originally planned by Dreyer himself, the filming of *Medea*, the classic Greek story of a mother who murders her children. Von Trier's breakthrough to film prominence came with his film *Breaking the Waves*, the story of a oil rig worker badly wounded in an accident, who is saved by the faith and diligence of his devoted young wife. She follows the orders of her sick husband to sleep with as many men as possible. She dies in the attempt—he is miraculously brought back to life.

A filmmaker is not damned by his social background and is by no means fated to repeat his own or the mistakes of his parents, but von Trier's development as a filmmaker is, in many respects, not accidental and certainly not exceptional. On the basis of *The Idiots*, one concludes that he is evidently motivated by a dislike, even a disgust for society as it stands. At the same time he is apparently blind to any way of changing society in a meaningful way. He has chosen the well-trodden and fairly threadbare path of individual self-liberation. There is something a bit provincial in all this, but von Trier seems to be espousing the notion, popular during the radicalisation of the 1960s, that mental disorder represents a higher and superior form of perception. And when that fails, there is always faith.

That von Trier's films can titillate and provoke is indisputable. The same *Guardian* journalist calls him “the most original and questing film-maker working in Europe today”; one hopes for the sake of European filmmaking that this is not the case. *The Idiots* has been proclaimed “Film of the Month” by the influential *Jury der Evangelischen Filmarbeit* in Germany. In fact von Trier's film is an accurate portrayal of the anguish and frustration of a section of today's intelligentsia, unhappy in their own skins, but unable or unwilling to explore the possibilities for genuine social change—not a pretty sight and by no means the basis for a renewal of film culture.



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