

Is there anything to the Dogme 95 group?

Open Hearts, directed by Susanne Bier, written by Bier and Anders Thomas Jensen; The Lawless Heart, written and directed by Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter

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From the vantage point of history, even simply cinema history, some things are decidedly less important than others. The Dogme 95 group of filmmakers and film could easily turn out to be such a phenomenon.

Founded with considerable fanfare and self-promotion in March 1995, the group of mostly Scandinavian filmmakers has had its opportunity and been found largely wanting. Theoretically, the fact that Danish director Lars von Trier, the movement's spiritual leader, has made a series of bad (sometimes awful), often misanthropic films (*Zentropa*, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, *Dancer in the Dark*) would not by itself signify the group's failure or irrelevance, although it could hardly be considered encouraging.

Trier has the right to make a career out of his own intellectual disorientation—born to left-wing parents, the director apparently rejected radical bohemianism in favor of Catholicism (“I’m a Catholic, but I don’t worship Catholicism for Catholicism’s own sake. I have felt the need to experience a sense of belonging with a religious community, because my parents were convinced atheists”), but it’s unfortunate that his profoundly muddled work is treated as a serious artistic contribution.

The quality of the Dogme films has varied. Thomas Vinterberg’s *Festen* (*Celebration*, 1998) was one of the more creditable efforts, although its lazy notion (or implication) that society’s problems could be reduced to child abuse is all too frequently advanced these days and does not convince. Other films have ranged from the innocuous (*Italian for Beginners*) to the noisy and pointless (*The King is Alive*) to the execrable (*Julien Donkey-Boy*).

The original Dogme 95 manifesto ranted against the slogans of “individualism and freedom” and the “anti-bourgeois cinema” which had itself become “bourgeois,” but what it was arguing for was far less clear. The manifesto noted: “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 films into uniform, because individual film will be decadent by definition.” Presumably on this basis, the directors swore a “Vow of Chastity,” promising to eschew studio shooting, artificial lighting, flashbacks and illusion-creating techniques in general.

If one were to take the passage about putting “films into

uniform” seriously, it would have distinctly reactionary implications. In any event, the reference to “avant-garde” having a “military connotation” is downright peculiar. On the contrary, the phrase has been associated historically (since the 1840s) with advanced artistic and social views, with opposition to the status quo. Nothing apparently could be farther from Trier’s mind.

In general, the manifesto and the various Dogme materials avoid discussing the substance of the problem of contemporary cinema, the fact, for example, that it has next to nothing to say about the realities of modern life. That there is widespread dissatisfaction with both the commercial and independent cinemas is undeniable. But what is to be done about it?

The basic strategy of Trier and a number of the other Dogme filmmakers has been to set characters in certain artificially “extreme” emotional or physical situations and see what becomes of them. We discover that while some people react badly, others react well: a not entirely groundbreaking discovery.

In their initial statement, Trier and Vinterberg called on filmmakers to make the following promise: “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.” This is the tedious quasi-postmodern argument; translated into the Dogme initiators’ overheated prose. How “truth” can be forced out of characters and settings without an understanding of the “whole” (social life) remains a mystery. In reality, it can’t be and the artistic results are inevitably contrived, superficial and impressionistic.

Susanne Bier’s *Open Hearts* (*Elsker dig for evigt*—literally, “Love You Forever”) is not one of the worst of the Dogme efforts. Bier avoids the most absurd pitfalls into which less canny Dogme filmmakers have tumbled. The film remains coherent to the end. Nonetheless, examined closely, the film’s essential implausibility and evasiveness come to light.

A young engaged couple, Cecile and Joachim, experience a terrible tragedy when he is accidentally struck by a car and paralyzed. Initially Joachim vents his anger and bitterness over the cards that fate has dealt him on Cecile. He kicks her out of his hospital room, refuses to see her. She, in her misery, turns to the husband of the woman who hit her fiancé, Niels, a doctor in the

hospital treating Joachim. When the affair becomes serious, Niels walks out on his wife, Marie, and his three children.

Meanwhile Joachim comes to terms (all too easily) with his condition and asks for Cecile to visit him again. She immediately breaks off her relations with Niels. Joachim, now fully reconciled, makes clear that he does not expect Cecile to marry or even share his life; she is free to return to Niels—but will she? We don't know. In any event, Niels tells her, if he had it all to do over again, he would do the same thing.

Why?

Presumably we are dealing once again with the ironic and inexplicable workings of the human heart. That is a little too easy. After all, Flaubert went to considerable lengths to explain why Emma Bovary had marital difficulties. Tolstoy made a similar effort. The affair between the minister's wife and her "stepson" in Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* is emotionally and historically plausible. In general, serious artists have taken pains to illuminate their characters' behavior, rather than to emphasize those actions and traits they do not understand.

However, in *Open Hearts* we are to accept on faith that Niels has come unglued over Cecile. Why? In its overall structure of feeling and conclusion, the film suggests that their affair, at least on his part, is an example of elemental human behavior, the truth beneath the social and professional masks. The filmmaker goes out of her way to paint Marie and the children in generally favorable colors. The problem does not appear to lie there.

If overwhelming passion, sexual or otherwise, is the explanation, we had better see some sign of it. But, frankly, there is little chemistry between Niels and Cecile evidenced on screen. She is less interesting and attractive than his wife.

If, on the other hand, this is simply a case of a middle-aged man falling for a younger woman, then it is hardly ironic and inexplicable. It is rather typical and banal, with all sorts of social and psychological underpinnings. And such an explanation would make a mockery of Niels's last comment, that he would gladly repeat the entire experience. Since, in this case, he would have caused a great deal of suffering principally out of self-delusion; it is unclear why we are to treat this remark sympathetically, or even seriously.

There is a third possibility, that Niels has acted out of a sense of responsibility to the fiancée of the woman his wife has grievously injured. Perhaps he is even the unconscious agent of a divinely directed revenge against Marie. That would introduce an entirely external element, seeing as neither Joachim, who stepped into traffic without looking, nor Cecile appear to blame the woman.

Bier, in interviews, has discussed the film as an effort to examine the consequences of tragedy, noting that she is Jewish, and thus acutely aware of the possibility of catastrophe, and that the world has been more aware of this general problem since September 11. The latter comment is somewhat revealing, insofar as much of the world lives with catastrophe on a nearly daily basis.

In any event, these are legitimate issues, but *Open Hearts* does little to explore them. The tragedy itself is hardly the center of the work, whatever the filmmakers may have intended. The film rather easily detaches itself from the auto accident and becomes a rather conventional study of a love affair. One forgets the affair's

origins, and the scenes in which Cecile is pulled back to the hospital bed do little to remind us. Poor Joachim seems quite external to events at a certain point.

Moreover, the comparison between traumatic historical events and a traffic accident, as personally devastating as it may be, is inappropriate. These terrible events were precisely not accidental, not natural disasters, although they are often treated that way, and an explanation of their *causes*, not merely their consequences, ought to be the subject of inquiry.

Bier's method, and it is the method of the Dogme filmmakers in general, is to ignore causality, i.e., history (the infamous "whole"), and concentrate entirely on the immediacy of disaster. If a bomb is thrown into a crowd, they ask, how will X, Y or Z react? In this the element of accident and chance does play a larger role, demonstrating the relatively arbitrary character of the circumstances. Minor artists concern themselves exclusively with such problems.

Open Hearts lacks spontaneity and fails to move the spectator because it is not essentially taken from life, but constructed in order to prove the filmmaker's superficial premise, that human circumstances and the human heart are beyond comprehension.

Another film with 'heart' in its title, *The Lawless Heart*, directed by Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter (*Boyfriends*) is even less consequential. It tells the story, from three points of view, of how a number of lives are affected by the drowning death of a gay restaurateur in a small British town. Its most pleasing sequence is its first. At a funeral, Corrine (Clémentine Célerié) asks Dan (Bill Nighy), a man she is trying to pick up, if anyone close to him has ever died. "Yes.... No.... Well, he was my father."

The film goes downhill from there. Tom Hollander, who was remarkably amusing in *Bedrooms and Hallways*, is serious-minded and priggish here. This is a self-involved, slight little film. One critic, however, compared it to Olivier Assayas' *Fin août, début septembre*. This is unfair, it is not nearly half as bad as Assayas' film.



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