

EYEBLAZE # 4

THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS



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Part 4 of our new regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we shall focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.

The film:

In 1967, Jørgen Leth made a short film called *The Perfect Human*. In 2001, Lars von Trier challenged him to remake the film five times, each time under certain restrictions. Each obstruction demanded that Leth remake the film, for example, in a different setting, with himself as a performer, having a limited number of frames per shot, as a cartoon, etc. What ensued was an intellectual game between two very strong-willed filmmakers. This game, plus the five resulting remakes of Leth's original short, compose the documentary feature *The Five Obstructions*.

The Five Obstructions is, beyond anything else, a film about the creative process. A key part of the process is dealing with creative control. Filmmaking is always a battle between control and chaos; most often an attempt to impose some kind of order over chaotic elements such as money, people, weather, locations and so forth. We see in many of Trier's films an apparent embrace of chaos. At the very least, it is allowed to run amok inside carefully placed boundaries, and Trier finds a way to make it work according to the needs of the film. Control is also a personal issue for Trier who suffers from various phobias and obsessive compulsions. He seems engaged in a constant battle to gain control over himself and the world around him. His way of dealing with this within filmmaking is 'to set up limitations like we did with *Dogme*. By removing some options in certain areas, you're able to focus fully on other areas and rethink how you go about things.'

Interestingly, in *The Five Obstructions* Lars von Trier is attempting to get Jørgen Leth to relinquish his control. But Leth, in his cool emotional detachment, is clearly a man very much in control. It seems at times that Trier is simply

playing with Leth for his own amusement: he wants to push him, to trip him up. He seems intent even upon breaking him. Leth manages to produce a beautiful and interesting film, no matter how tough the restrictions. But even though Trier seems impressed by the quality of Leth's remakes he is unsatisfied, making comments such as: "I don't think you were true to what really matters to me". Trier sees that there is something that he has lost by taking this stance. He wants something raw and accidental to come through: something human and emotional. He wants the experience to leave a mark on him. He says to Leth after the first obstruction: 'There is a degree of perversion in maintaining a distance... I want you to move on from there, to make you empathise.'



The final obstruction has Leth doing nothing but reading a letter that Trier has composed over footage from the previous obstructions edited by Trier. This is the ultimate submission to the game that is being played. It is not for the sake of amusement that Lars von Trier is taking this mature filmmaker whom he admires and asking him to revisit a film of his youth. Trier has maintained something youthful in his approach to his work. Leth, much to Trier's disappointment, seems to have lost something.

The Five Obstructions is not an exercise in how films are made. It is a lesson in the importance of breaking out of habits, of constantly keeping oneself in check and of becoming critical of oneself. As Trier says in the film: 'This is therapy, not a film competition with yourself. You've made the best film, I assume the best was the first. We are using it to go back in time, to see where we can go and examine it.'

Who made it:

Lars von Trier is possibly the only completely uncompromising director working in mainstream cinema at the moment, and one of the few who seems to be more sincerely concerned with experimenting and searching through cinema than just using it as a way to make a living. To be able to work in this manner he co-founded the Danish production company Zentropa with producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen in 1992, of which they share an equal ownership of a fourth, another fourth belonging to employees. Zentropa differs from the major competitors in the market by having established a decentralised autonomous organisation structure, which creates space for new ideas and alternative methods of production, and aims to be self-providing in all aspects of filmmaking.

Lars von Trier is currently working on two new projects: *Nymphomaniac* with Charlotte Gainsborough, who has been a key collaborator in his last two films *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, and *Gesamt*, a usergenerated project where the public is asked to film and send in material inspired by six art pieces proposed by Lars von Trier. The final film will be edited by Trier using a selection of the submitted material.

Why it's important to us:

This film, and Lars von Trier's work in general, is a reminder that to be true to oneself demands constant work. Creativity, to put it simply, is the discovery of new ideas. To find new ideas one must maintain an openness that leads one to take risks and not fall into habits. This is a trait we admire in Lars von Trier: his constant experimentation and reinvention is what makes him such an important director. His work goes beyond mere 'taste' and 'style'; instead, it is about searches, explorations, leaps of faith, self-awareness. He uses film as a tool for studying and trying to understand ourselves and all the worlds in which we live.



How to see it:

The Five Obstructions and most of Lars von Trier's and Jørgen Leth's filmography should be fairly easy to find available on DVD online.

Further reading/viewing:

There are of course his films that are all worth watching, we won't attempt to select one over another as they are all easily available. There is an interesting documentary which is filmed behind the scenes of his 2003 movie *Dogville* called *Dogville Confessions* which is worth checking out.

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