

LESSONS FROM LARS VON TRIER

THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS



Originally published: *APEngine*, April 27, 2010 by Daniel Fawcett

"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."

Lars von Trier, *The Five Obstructions*

Filmmakers: how brave are you? How pure is your quest? How true is your art? I wonder how many of us would be strong enough to stand up to the challenges of Lars von Trier, as Jorgen Leth does in *The Five Obstructions*.

In 1967, Leth made a short film called *The Perfect Human*. In 2003, Von Trier challenged him to remake the film five times, each time under certain restrictions. What ensued was an intellectual game between two very strong-willed filmmakers.

It seems at times that Von 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 Von 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". Let us ask, what does matter to Von Trier? What would satisfy him?

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 Von Trier's films an apparent embrace of chaos. At the very least, it is allowed to run amok inside carefully placed boundaries. Von 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, Von Trier is attempting to get Leth to relinquish his control. But Leth, in his cool emotional detachment, is clearly a man very much in control. Von 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 Von Trier has composed, over footage from the previous Obstructions edited by Von Trier. This is the ultimate submission to the game that is being played. It is not for the sake of amusement that Von Trier is taking this mature filmmaker and asking him to revisit a film of his youth. Von Trier has maintained something youthful in his approach to his work. Leth, much to Von Trier's disappointment, seems to have lost something.

The film 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. It teaches that what really matters in art is the viewpoint of the artist, but that this is no easy proposition: 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 something of youth – an openness that leads one to take risks and not fall into habits. Maybe Leth's weakness as a filmmaker is his reluctance to take any real risks. This is a trait I admire in 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.

So: filmmakers, how brave are you? How pure is your quest? How true is your art? Will you take up the challenge constantly to experiment and to seek out new ideas – and find the strength to bring back what you discover?

"Look at your habits ... are they the product of innumerable little cowardices and laziness or of your courage and inventive reason?" Nietzsche

For more articles and information about the projects of *The Underground Film Studio*, visit: <http://theundergroundfilmstudio.co.uk>