

The Five Obstructions

Directed by Lars Von Trier and Jorgen Leth

Words: Steve Anderson

We are searching for something fictional, not factual. Fiction is limited by our imagination and facts by our insight, and the part of the world that we are seeking cannot be encompassed by a "story" or embraced from an "angle."

-Lars Von Trier "Defocus"

Ever since the widespread publication of photographs showing American soldiers torturing Iraqi captives in the Abu Ghraib prison, Michael Moore's Oscars night exhortation that "we are living in fictitious times," somehow no longer rings true. The times we are living in seem all too real and, against all expectations, the proof seems to lie in a few dozen grainy digital photographs e-mailed from half way around the world.

For a long time now, postmodern culture has comforted itself with the thought that our age is defined by the simulacrum, an exact copy for which there is no original. But even in the midst of a media culture obsessed with remakes and franchising of familiar products, the works that transcend are those which bother to explore in a non-trivial way the relations between people; reality and artifice; old and new, the mixed-up muddle of construction, conceit, authenticity and belief that is contemporary media.

With *The Five Obstructions*, Dogme 95 co-founder Lars Von Trier continues to challenge our understanding of the fundamental relations between film and the world. The film's conceit is deceptively simple: Von Trier sends his old friend, Danish filmmaker Jorgen Leth, out to remake his own 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times, operating under an increasingly malicious set of rules each time. The resulting film will present the five remakes, interspersed with clips from the original film and sequences with Von Trier and Leth viewing and critiquing the films.

Von Trier's ostensible goal in *The Five Obstructions* (which he wittily calls his first "dogumentary") is to force Leth to make a bad film and to suffer while doing it. Von Trier thus opens himself up to the usual (and not entirely undeserved) charges that self-promotion and sadistic manipulation are actually at the heart of his project. The original film, which Von Trier calls "a little gem that we are going to ruin," is an obscure, minimalist exercise in ironic stylishness in which a man performs everyday actions for the camera, modeling the "perfect" way to dance, shave dress, dine, and interact with the perfect woman. A self-investigation conducted with mock-ethnographic objectivity, *The Perfect Human* offers a series of beautifully captured, emotionally detached tableaux that are anathema to the intimacy and intensity that characterizes Von Trier's filmmaking ethos.

Leth, who is known for long takes and cool, documentary precision, offers a perfect target for Von Trier's experiment. In an effort to plunge him into chaos, Von Trier sends Leth to Cuba and prohibits him from using any shot longer than 12 frames. Initially taken aback, Leth returns with a quivering dance of images and fleeting glimpses of shapes and colors that is positively mesmerizing. Upon inspecting the film, Von Trier declares with mock indignation, "You made a great film, but not the one I wanted. I want you to make a bad film!"

In the second sequence, Von Trier endeavors to send Leth to what he considers the worst, most wretched place on earth and to cast himself in the role of the perfect human. Leth gamely chooses the red light district in Bombay, where he shoots a sequence with himself in formal attire inside a plastic enclosure, surrounded by a desperately impoverished crowd of onlookers. When Von Trier views the segment disapprovingly and threatens to send Leth back to Bombay, the older filmmaker flatly refuses, revealing both the limits of the two men's sadomasochistic relationship and those of the filmmaking experiment. Arguably, although it is impossible to draw a clear line between Von Trier as impresario and conceptual genius, it is his insistence on reaching these limits in each of his productions that makes him one of the most important and compelling filmmakers of our time.

Perhaps the least convincing of the five remakes is Leth's third segment, in which Von Trier (as punishment for the Bombay segment) provides no restrictions whatsoever, opening a void of existential proportions into which he hopes Leth will plummet. In the absence of obstacles to overcome, Leth indeed veers closest to images that are conventionally picturesque, ultimately producing the segment that is simultaneously the most beautiful and most lacking in consequence. It's not that Leth's unconstrained images are unforgivably aestheticized, rather, they fall short of the other remakes because they lack the tension of Von Trier's arbitrarily imposed boundaries and the underlying psychodynamics of their friendship that provides the film's true center.

At first, Von Trier's obstruction for the fourth remake appears to be the most devastating of all. The film must be an animated cartoon, a form which both men profess to loathe. At last, it seems that Von Trier will elicit a genuine failure – a "crap cartoon" – from the uncooperative Leth. But Leth cleverly enlists the help of Bob Sabiston, whose rotoscoping software was used to create Richard Linklater's oneiric *Waking Life*. Rendered into animated form, Leth's live action images provide one of the most remarkable sequences in the film, with a minimalist aesthetic and lyricism that most clearly evoke the original.

On the brink of defeat, Von Trier resorts to a final obstruction in which Leth is all but removed from the production, compelled only to read a letter to Von Trier, (written by Von Trier himself), accompanied by a sequence of images of Von Trier's choosing. Leth complies, lending his voice to Von Trier's words

as if they were his own, and this simplest of gestures becomes perhaps the most moving sequence in the film. Following all the contrivance and manipulation of the earlier efforts, this final segment alone reveals the power of a simple, scripted performance and the conjunction of voice and image as vehicles for expressing what is important about a relationship between two people.

Steve Anderson is a writer and media artist in Los Angeles.