Losing Control: Lars von Trier and

the Production of Authenticity and the Auteur

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STATEMENT

This dissertation represents my own work and due acknowledgement is given whenever information is derived from other sources. No part of this dissertation has been or is being concurrently submitted for any other form of qualification at any other university.

Signed _____

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Lars von Trier's latest three films, *The Five Obstructions* (2003), *The Boss of It All* (2006), and *Antichrist* (2009), and posits that a principal thread running through his oeuvre is the motif of losing control. He explores the idea of relinquishing control at varying levels in the films: from liberating the subject matter, to liberating the camera, to liberating the director from the creative process.

I posit two broad arguments: first, the paradoxical act of losing control through establishing obstructions, as manifested through von Trier's practice, is a conduit through which authenticity in the cinematic experience is wrought. The second argument suggests that the conceit of surrendering aesthetic control is simultaneously his effort at manifesting his selfhood and identity as an auteur. Through the process of deconstructing the agency of the auteur, von Trier is simultaneously constructing and asserting the persona that is Lars von Trier. The self-reflexive construction of his persona signifies the authenticity which he often seeks to express, and thus, it is a curious exploration of how one becomes an 'authentic' auteur, where the dynamic between control and play might be characterised as the muse and inspiration that drives his art.

Introduction: Control and Authenticity

> [T]he immediate task of the artist [is] to achieve in his art the muse of the art itself. (Cavell 103)

Why should we take Lars von Trier seriously? Film critic Robin Wood asked the same of Sir Alfred Hitchcock in 1965, when the influential Hollywood director was at the height of his popularity as an auteur (55). Wood follows this question with a short reflection on the circumstance that prompts such a question — when placed next to the more established arts such as poetry, drama, or painting, why should one take cinema seriously indeed? It is perhaps due to the common conviction that the 'seventh art' is a collaborative effort that it seems harder to distinguish the source of creative energy in the matrix of contributors in a film's genesis. Also, in the case of studio-led productions, the concept of a film as an economic product for mass consumption does not lend itself well to arguments of film as a unique art form. In such a system, the director is but a powerless component in the larger industrial complex. However, it is when singular directors are motivated to explore and interrogate the medium with which they work that the film text becomes a reflection of such creative drives, and hence, one begins to consider the film as art, and the director as auteur. This is what Cavell notes in the opening quote, and these ideas will subsequently explain why one should indeed take Lars von Trier seriously.

In comparison to the critical and popular appeal of Hitchcock, von Trier is probably a lesser-known director from the realm of European cinema, and whose

films do not reach most audiences outside of the art cinema circuit. Nevertheless, there is much in common between the two directors, and this is particularly evident in their respective pursuit of a 'pure cinema.' For Hitchcock, the 'purity' of the film-viewing experience lies in an understanding of the medium and its technical possibilities such as editing and camera perspective that may be manipulated accordingly to evoke an emotional response from the spectator (Wood 55-6). Von Trier's concerns are conceivably metaphysical in nature, but nonetheless focused on this concept of authenticity. The Danish director advances a cause for a meaningful participation in the art-making process that he phrases in his Dogme 95 manifesto as a re-discovery of the inventive stimulus in creating a work of art. This is likely to be the "muse of the art" that Cavell refers to; it is indeed authenticity that von Trier seeks, and it is the motivating factor that shapes his *oeuvre*.

Von Trier's films are remarkably original in style, and this is probably a result of his insistence on a clear and uncompromising masochism in his aesthetic policies. His is a curious journey from an exhibition of all possible film techniques[1] to a total relinquishing of them in favour of an ascetic mode of filmmaking, which is also a move towards an authenticity in the act of creation and meaning in art. With the foray into Dogme and its "Vow of Chastity" that includes ten austere rules for filmmakers, one might mistake this as a shift from no rules to an overabundance of contraints. On the contrary, I argue that his is a shift from the

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[1] Von Trier's earlier films such as *The Element of Crime* (1984) and *Europa* (1991) were very much exercises in film style. Both featured a technically stylised aesthetic and might also be described as a compendium of all, if not most, conventional filmmaking techniques in cinema. These include the dramatic use of black and white film, visual effects, lighting and sound effects, elaborate sets, melodramatic acting, and conventional editing techniques.

rigid rules of conventional filmmaking to a different, and paradoxical, set of obstructions and limitations that engender a complete and utter freedom to create and innovate. In other words, the filmmaker is forcibly liberated from habit and convention, and is now challenged and provoked into working in an unfamiliar and therefore creative mode. Indeed, he lays down certain edicts such as the Dogme rules, but only to force himself to work around them. As a result, his films contain the productive energy that enables the viewer to witness an artist in the rigorous act of interrogating and further defining or re-defining his craft. At the same time, the formation and perpetuation of the artist's identity is just as crucial to his enterprise as the pursuit of creativity and innovation. In a larger cultural context, one might frame this as a modernist struggle to defend the individual's selfhood through finding new ways of artistic expression in the face of a postmodern dismissal of the notions of authenticity and meaning.

To characterise his methodology more succinctly: the principal thread running through his *oeuvre* is the motif of control. He explores the idea of relinquishing control at varying levels in the three films examined here: from liberating the subject matter, to liberating the camera, to liberating the director from the filmmaking process. Through the general idea of surrendering control over one's conscious mode of filmmaking, von Trier takes care to express the resultant agency that enables him to reveal certain moments of expressive authenticity in the art-making process, and thereby manifest his selfhood and artistic identity as a film auteur. His moments of aesthetic self-flagellation and masochism via the implementation of harsh rules that force a relinquishing of

control are but means to achieve a truly original cinematic art that is not blindly derived from conventional methods. In this sense, authenticity connotes a ceasing to perform convention and the articulation of the experiential element of chance and creative chaos while re-discovering the filmmaking process. With his self-defined position as the 'control freak' director on set who paradoxically relinquishes control at the same time, he not only demonstrates such tensions between control and chaos, or obstruction and innovation within the narrative of his films, but also expresses these tensions in his engagement with the public and the press. Therefore, it is not the narrative nor the stories that are the primary concern here. What matters is that when we watch a Lars von Trier film, we are not engaged only in the protagonist's predicament, nor are we only savouring the salvation that the protagonist experiences. Instead, we find delight in watching the filmmaker reveal himself through his craft. In other words, what we are witnessing is a director at work; we are spectators and observers to this grand documentary about Lars von Trier, crafted by von Trier. Consequently, this is where the significance of his art is revealed. It is his persona at work that is signified by the authenticity which he often seeks to express, and it is an exploration of how one becomes an 'authentic' auteur, where the dynamic between control and play might be characterised as the 'muse' and inspiration that drives his art.

At this point, a short discussion of the term 'authenticity' as it functions in this thesis is necessary. Denis Dutton suggests that the term 'authentic' as used in aesthetics might be further distinguished into two broad categories: *nominal authenticity* and *expressive authenticity*. The first is concerned with the formal and

empirical identification of an art object's origin, authorship, and provenance, while the latter category connotes the object's character as "a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs" (259). To address the first, von Trier's work interrogates the idea of nominal authenticity in that he acknowledges the ontological conundrum of cinema: for example, who is the director/creator of *The Five Obstructions* (2003)? Is the film a documentary or fiction? Such questions determine and constitute the identity of the work of art, and are thus understood as denoting this first level of 'authenticity' in an art object. What is of more interest to this thesis, however, is the second formulation Dutton suggests: expressive authenticity. He refers to the term as an indication of "an authentic life [that] is lived with critical and independent sovereignty over one's choices and values," and further asserts that authenticity is seen as "committed, personal expression, being true [] to one's artistic self, rather than true to an historical tradition" (267). Since the notion of expressive authenticity does not refer directly to fact but rather, to an "emergent value possessed by works of art," it is far more problematic to articulate this sense of authenticity particularly with respect to film, an art whose ontology and provenance are most tenuous. When questions of realism, the artist's sincerity, genuineness of expression, and moral passion are counted toward the discourse of authenticity in art-making, the definition takes on an ambiguous quality. To identify expressive authenticity in such works, as Dutton admits, is "a contentious matter, involving any number of disputable judgements" (267). Still, the basic notion remains that expressive authenticity is a conception that favours the idea of originality and the foregrounding of the artist's

personal interrogation of his medium, film, and style, and his discovery (or re-discovery) of the aesthetic possibilities of cinema and its related components.

As such, the notion of expressive authenticity that surfaces as a result of the interplay between establishing and relinquishing control can be used fruitfully in a critique of von Trier's films, and this thesis will examine the instances of such authenticity and flesh out the idea in his later films. Several moments in the films discussed here will point toward this elusive quality of authenticity on film, and as mentioned earlier, such a quality is championed by von Trier not only as a primary conceit, but also as a signature of his work and his authorship. The degree by which his films and aesthetic interrogate the position and agency of the auteur in filmmaking is influenced by his insistence on technical and stylistic innovation. In eschewing convention and habit, von Trier seeks to empower the auteur by compelling him to commit to a mode of working that demands sacrifice, self-scrutiny, and originality. In this mode, the auteur is forced to confront his artistic values and undergo a re-negotiation of his aesthetic impulses. The result might come in various forms, such as, for the actors, the blurring of the boundaries between performing and being, the moments in which the nature of film and reality is radically refashioned, and so on.

Argument

This study takes as its subject the central motif of control in the aesthetic evolution in the works of Lars von Trier. Through an analysis of the three most recent

projects in his *oeuvre*, this thesis will examine the notions of control, authenticity, and auteurship in von Trier's post-Dogme theory and praxis. The films are *The Five Obstructions*, *The Boss of It All* (2006), and *Antichrist* (2009). While von Trier's earlier films such as *Idioterne* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *Dogville* (2003), and *Manderlay* (2005) were conceptually yoked to the Dogme aesthetic, the later projects mark a slight departure in that each film is a pronounced progression in terms of renouncing his control over his work. What this means is that with each successive film, he leaves various aspects such as the narrative, cinematography, or acting to the element of chance and randomness. This is done, as will be argued, with the aim of achieving a degree of expressive authenticity in the creative process, and through the exercise of this experience, as it were, the auteur's influence as a creator and innovator is legitimised. The larger question of why such a matter is a point of anxiety for von Trier might be answered when one considers the tensions between the general categories of art cinema and mainstream commercial cinema characterised by the Hollywood industry. This is an economic and aesthetic concern, for the latter's widespread influence upon filmmakers and audiences has the tendency to shape film production in such a way that voids the aesthetic possibilities that the medium can offer, while at the same time nullifying the credibility of the director as an artist. Von Trier attacks such notions through various means: his work consists of conceptual experiments that devise a film as a type of game-space, wherein obstructions and limitations are set upon the director or viewer, and the task of either is to overcome and solve these conceptual problems in a creative and unorthodox manner. Perhaps the most dominant problem explored is related to the auteur's relationship with technology

in film. Does the director control the film camera by using it as a tool of expression, or is the director controlled by the burgeoning technical possibilities of the film camera such that he necessarily must feature them at the expense of his individual perspective? Similarly, should actors consciously shape their performances to suit the camera's perspective, or should the camera be manipulated to allow actors the unrestricted space to genuinely express their roles? How can film, as an art, be utilised to affect the spectator's active emotional and intellectual involvement, instead of bullying spectators into being passive receivers of the images on the screen?

Therefore, the heart of this thesis explores two broad arguments: first, that the paradoxical act of losing control through establishing obstructions, as manifested through von Trier's practice, is a conduit through which authenticity in the filmmaking and film-viewing experience is wrought. The second argument follows the first, in that von Trier's unique manipulation of aesthetics — that is, the conceit of surrendering aesthetic control — to develop this sense of authenticity is simultaneously his effort at establishing the authority of his work as an auteur. One may also meaningfully categorise von Trier and his films as a revitalised modernist movement in contemporary cinema that calls for intense self-scrutiny. This is particularly true in the case of his later films. Through the process of examining and deconstructing the position of the auteur in a film like *The Boss of It All*, for example, von Trier is simultaneously constructing and asserting the public persona of Lars von Trier. The aim in this intense and sometimes paradoxical self-examination is really the pursuit of a discursive mode of cinematic

authenticity in form and function. In doing so, the auteur's creative voice expresses an authenticity that invests value in continual innovation and self-scrutiny to foster a meaningful cinema. The resultant proposition is that the motifs of control and chaos are consequently expressed as a tension between obstruction and liberation, where the implementation of rules and limitations forces the auteur into a certain powerlessness that liberates him from habit and allows him to expand the scope of his creative perspective to find new modes of cinematic expression.

Von Trier's quest for authenticity in cinema is indeed a creative force that disrupts conventions of cinematic expression, underscoring the fallacy of the notion that cinema is a product of formulas and templates after the mainstream Hollywood fashion. His provocative gestures through both his cinematic work and public persona have been a subject of intense study and criticism, and it is therefore the task of this thesis to augment the discussion with a focus on how von Trier fleshes out the discourse of control and chaos in the production of his most recent films.

Chapter 1: The Auteur and Authorship

In this thesis, frequent reference is made to the notion of the author or auteur of the film text. A director such as von Trier is certainly an auteur in his own right, with a specific artistic identity. However, what makes the auteur a figure that is uniquely differentiated from other directors? This section will outline a critical understanding of authorship in film aesthetics, then consider von Trier's interrogation of the auteur and artistic identity within this framework. A detailed discussion of auteur theory will not be covered, as the focus here is on the aesthetic position that von Trier takes regarding the intersection between control and free-play as a means of artistic self-scrutiny and innovation. That is, on a deeper level beyond aesthetics and style, von Trier's *oeuvre* is ultimately concerned with the question of the artist's subjectivity and how it is not only represented but constructed through various modes of expression in contemporary media. To a greater extent, one may view von Trier's entire career as his personal struggle to comprehend, construct, and maintain the "architecture of his identity" (Bainbridge 164).

The first paragraph of Susan Sontag's essay "On Style" is crucial to one's understanding of the auteur: "Style is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist's will. And as the human will is capable of an indefinite number of stances, there are an indefinite number of possible styles for works of art" (32). Sontag's emphasis is on the position of the author in an analysis of the specificities in different film styles. The stylistic judgement of the individual

author, in particular, is what differentiates his style from others. At the same time, the author is not meant to maintain a static stylistic signature, but rather, he operates with the compulsion to experiment with various possibilities offered by his artistic medium. To make sense of the film auteur, then, it is useful to consider that film style is the "human" element that determines an auteur's fingerprint on the text. It is of interest to this thesis that Sontag makes reference to the will of the artist as a "human" feature, a distinction that stands in opposition to the understanding of filmmaking as a technical and technological enterprise. In stark contrast to the conventional notion of a director as one who is involved in the production of films from a fixed stylistic template, the auteur is framed as a dynamic artistic identity that experiments, changes, and interrogates his aesthetic in myriad ways that the technicity of conventional modes of filmmaking is incapable of. As is commonly noted, there is an ambiguous tension between the human and the technological in the creative process of filmmaking. Some questions that are attendant on this dialectic are: Is film an art or the expression of technology? Is the director of a film an *auteur* (artist) or merely a *metteur*[2] (craftsman)? Proponents of the auteur theory viewed the former understanding of a director as a valuable object of scrutiny, whose creative authorship qualifies the conception of film as an art form, and thereby film aesthetics as a legitimate 'seventh art.'

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[2] Within the framework of 1960s auteur theory, the term *metteurs-en-scene* was used to label directors who did not inject any personal vision or style whatsoever into their films, as opposed to *auteurs* who consciously applied a coherent "body of signifiers" that would mark their artistic personalities. In other words, the former merely rearranged or organised the various elements of filmmaking to create a film, while the latter *crafted* their visual identities in their films (Bennett, Hickman, and Wall 164).

When one considers the breadth of styles embraced by von Trier in his body of work, a key thread lies in the formation of his persona. It has been a prime concern of his that the shaping of his directorial persona is foregrounded and closely tied to his experiments in film style. For someone who is frequently labelled '*agent provocateur*' and '*enfant terrible*' by critics, it is no wonder, then, that his films, aesthetic, and ideological habits generate much discussion, polarising critics with diverse opinions about his work. It is not without an ironic and playful self-reflexivity that he underscores his awareness of such tensions. For instance, at the beginning of *Antichrist*, the title is immediately followed by his name, humorously acknowledging and cultivating the provocative nature of his persona. With his insistence on continually experimenting with form and style, along with the self-scrutiny he applies to his praxis, it is significant that this particular trait has been a defining characteristic of his cinema, and this is precisely where the ideas of auteurship and authenticity intersect. For von Trier, the key to sustaining a bona fide artistic practice lies in continually re-examining one's own aesthetic ideology as an auteur, since any stagnation in terms of style or custom can only result in an artificiality that dulls the artistic voice and further creative output. His idea of auteurship, then, is not that the director must have an unchanging signature style that defines his artistic identity, but rather, a commitment to self-scrutiny, varying degrees of provocation, and reinvention — as

expressed in his "Statement of Revitalisation" in 2006.[3]

Much has been discussed about von Trier's 'game cinema' that foregrounds his modernist impulse to lay bare the construct that various modes of film practice are contingent on (Bainbridge; Ponech; Simons; Smith). He achieves this through the motif of game-play both in form and content, where rules, chance, challenge, play-acting, true/false identities, performance, and discovery are consequential elements in his films. His engagement with the dialectic between play and control was expressed early in his career with *Breaking The Waves* (1996), the *Europa* trilogy (1984 to 1991), then more perspicuously in his Dogme piece, *Idioterne*, followed by *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*, *Manderlay*, and the three films that are the objects of interest in this thesis. It is worth considering that his career is marked by a pattern that reflects an inverse (and paradoxical) relationship between play and control: von Trier purports to be exerting lesser artistic control over the production with each successive film, while the degree of free-play is simultaneously increased in every film that follows. Despite his pronouncements, this contrary tension between play and control is not as sharply defined. For example, while a film like *The Boss of It All* is produced in such a way that limits the director's control over the cinematography, allowing completely randomised

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[3] This is a text released in the year of his fiftieth birthday that echoes the intentions of Dogme 95. In this statement, von Trier announces his intention to "rediscover [his] original enthusiasm for film" by reducing the scope of his future productions "in regards to funding, technology, the size of the crew, and particularly casting."

Several key terms are sprinkled through the text, such as "freer terms," "liberate," "ascetic," "narrowing down," and "curiosity and play." Indeed, these ideas are expressed through *The Boss of It All*, which was debuted at the Copenhagen Film Festival, not at Cannes where von Trier premiered most of his films. Later, in a contradictory move that is classic von Trier, he makes a complete about-turn with the production and release of *Antichrist* in 2009.

camera movements[4] in addition to enabling space for improvisation for the actors, there is still the overall sense that the narrative and its themes are ultimately driven by von Trier's sole ideology, direction, and personality. Thus, while on the surface it may seem that von Trier has relegated control of the film to extraneous 'free' elements, it is an emphatic point that he is ultimately responsible for the film's genesis and development. The paradox lies in the fact that even though his gestures of 'losing control' allow a certain authenticity of expression to emerge from the free-play, such 'authenticity' is already ontologically inauthentic, being an artefact of von Trier's experiment in film style. As such, the theatrical quality to his frequent manifestos and declarations of losing control over his artistry might have a further agenda, which brings us to the third argument of this thesis: that von Trier's increasing preference to distance the auteur from the film ironically foregrounds the authority, albeit a fragmented one, of the auteur's identity.[5]

Writing is a matter of individuals expressing themselves, and Foucault comments in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* that for any authored text, authorship is a social construction; there exists a plurality of selves fulfilling this author function

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[4] This is achieved via von Trier's Automavision process. This process will be explained in Chapter 3.

[5] Such a paradoxical gesture complicates accepted notions of auteur theory, which primarily declares that the director necessarily has full control over aesthetic and technical aspects of the production of a film. Perhaps what von Trier has successfully done, then, is to expose certain weaknesses of established notions of auteur theory: Peter Wollen suggests that it is the director's "style" or "basic motifs" that are repeated through his *oeuvre* that distinguishes a film artist from others (566). Andrew Sarris insists too that the director's ability to impart "meaning" to the film material is the "ultimate glory" of his authorship (562). Von Trier's aesthetic attitudes, then, problematises such an understanding of authorship, and proves that an understanding of the auteur need not be shackled to arguments of style and repeated motifs. The auteur's creative enterprise can thus be productive and 'meaningful' even when his preferred style is disrupted in favour of chance and randomness, as will be further explored in Chapter 2.

in the text (Gutting 12). Nowhere is this notion clearer in von Trier's films than in *The Boss of It All* where, on the level of the narrative, it is suggested that the IT company's imaginary boss (taken to be an analogue for the auteur) is a fictive construct that comprises multiple selves invented by the real boss himself (who does so to avoid complications). Here, the notion of authenticity melts away very quickly and problematises the related discussions of control and the auteur. Two points arise: first, in any case, there is no question of the auteur's significance in the matrix of filmmaking, since without the controlling figure of the auteur/author/ director—and *even* if his presence is illusory as in the film—there would be no starting element to drive creative imagination. Hence, the auteur is a necessary figure that cannot be relegated to a lower rung of influence. Second, the figure of an authority with multiple selves is a repeated motif in von Trier's films. If we take this to be a reflection of his personal anxieties as a director, one may view von Trier's entire career as an attempt to refocus these selves into a coherent and authentically original figure and then, to assert the author figure's creative influence and power in the face of increasingly depersonalised, technology-driven and studio-led filmmaking that is characteristic of commercial cinema.

The tension between control and free-play in his cinematic games is furthermore a means by which von Trier shapes his authorship in cinema, that stimulates discussions of authenticity in the praxis of his aesthetic. While he sees himself as the master puppeteer in his films, von Trier's methodology insists that there still is the need for the director to divest control of the film in order to produce original images that confront and interrogate narrative and stylistic

conventions in cinema. In other words, the authenticity of von Trier's aesthetic practice, as it were, is produced by first, the complex re-examination of his aesthetic choices through his method of relinquishing control over the production of a film, and second, the freedom with which his subjects can express truth under this liberal framework. The act of relinquishing control is his purposeful way of asserting his artistic identity. This is a unique paradox that is present not only in von Trier's works but also in the discourse of *cinéma vérité*, where even though the camera is let loose to freely document the chosen subject in a realistic manner, it is already an exercise in the subjectivity of the director who edits the material to be finally presented. For instance, in *Dancer in the Dark* and *The Boss of It All*, the use of the one hundred cameras[6] and the Automavision project respectively are von Trier's attempts to manifest the paradox of realism in cinema. Yet, as will be argued in the next chapter, there is the recognition that for all the attempts at manifesting authentic and objective truth in the acting and in the visual documentation of the narrative, the film is always already subject to the director's overriding control. Hence, von Trier's film experiments and pursuit of authenticity through them ultimately highlight the dominant position of the auteur, and in particular, the auteur's function as a source of creative influence.

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[6] For the musical scenes, von Trier's team set up one hundred digital video cameras at various locations in the scene, where the cameras would capture the action simultaneously. He would edit the scene later with frequent jump cuts that include the contrasting shots from different perspectives. The point of this set-up was to produce a certain realism where the actors might be less conscious of a single camera's presence and therefore perform without 'projecting' to any single camera.

Chapter 2: *The Five Obstructions* - From the Perfect to the Human

> Jørgen Leth: "So we are entering a game — but not a sweet children's game. It will be full of traps and vicious turns." (qtd. in Leth 11)

Actively controlled creativity is the name of this game, and Lars von Trier is loath to let Jørgen Leth forget it. *The Five Obstructions* can be loosely classified as a documentary of an experiment between two directors engaged in a little game in the style of 'Simon Says.' The task: Leth is to remake *The Perfect Human* (*Det perfekte menneske*, 1967) five times, each time according to a set of criteria or constraints suggested by von Trier and agreed on by both directors. Any failure to complete the task satisfactorily is punished. The restrictions are harsh, and so is the game master. Strict adherence to the rules is essential, while at the same time Leth is also expected to demonstrate creative problem-solving to a high degree. By the end of the exercise, Leth escapes relatively unscathed, having created five very arduous but refreshing remakes of his original short film while leaving von Trier frustrated that his attempts to psychologically dismantle his ex-mentor have been confounded.

This is a collaboration that has resulted in a unique and very thoughtful reflection on a wide spectrum of themes. Two of the most relevant to this study are, first, the emergence of authentic moments of creative agency through the imposed limitations that strip one of artistic control, and second, the interrogation of the idea of the director *qua* auteur. In the latter regard, I examine in fuller detail the

position of power that von Trier takes in the film, and suggest that he is the sole architect of this experiment, despite the collaborative premise. Furthermore, the notions of authenticity, creativity, and innovation are foregrounded in the film's larger explication of how authorship is defined by von Trier. Some of the questions considered are as follows: when student (von Trier) meets master (Leth), what happens when the two collide, and who is the author of the film? What is produced when one director imposes his creative will on another agent? Far from being an Oedipal struggle as several critics have characterised the film (Macnab "Lars Was Trying to Murder Me"), the test of wills between two auteurs is what this section is interested in, and, by my conjecture, it is precisely what von Trier is exploring through this experiment.

Jørgen Leth (b. 1939) is recognised internationally as one of the pioneers of experimental documentary filmmaking, as well as being a revered, award-winning cultural institution in Denmark (Brooks). In the 1970s, von Trier was a student at the Danish Film Institute in Copenhagen at the time when Leth was serving as a senior consultant. Von Trier developed an intense reverence for Leth; he was "a little boy who adored me" as his mentor describes, having watched Leth's *The Perfect Human* at least twenty times, a fact that von Trier boasts in the film (Macnab "Lars Was Trying to Murder Me").

Concerning their aesthetic methodology, the two directors operate in different, yet similar ways. As a filmmaker, Leth prefers the aesthetic of the observer, and takes on a cool, distanced position, preferring to let events unfold

before the camera's distanced gaze. What is typically Leth are fragmented scenes of various subjects in quotidian activities. Reality is made strange, after the Brechtian fashion. It is broken up into significant moments, presented in a mock-scientific mode, and accompanied by distanced fascination (Schepelern "To Calculate the Moment: Leth's Life as Art" 96). Works such as *Notes on Love* (*Det legende menneske*, 1986), *The Perfect Human*, and *66 Scenes from America* (*66 scener fra Amerika*, 1982) are typical of his aesthetic. The latter famously features a continuous five-minute take where Andy Warhol, in a most ordinary fashion, unwraps and eats a hamburger with ketchup, after which he gazes languidly into the camera with excruciating silence. He then breaks the silence with the nondescript utterance: "Uhm… My name is Andy Warhol and, uh, I just finished eating, uh, a hamburger." This could be an example of *temps mort*, perhaps, but it is more so a bizarre, empty sign that blurs the distinction between life/reality and art. In such a scene, we experience a cool, objective distance between the non-participatory director and its subject. One possible reading here is that there is no intrusion into the diegetic space, nor is there any attempt at extending meaning from Warhol's performance within the frame to the 'reality' that is beyond the frame. In this implicit assertion of the hermetic frame, one could say that this signifies the starkly enforced division between Leth/camera(man)/director/ documentarian/observer and the observed. Such a principle allows the subject to 'naturally' perform itself without explicit influence from the director, and this is not foreign to the documentary mode. From a larger perspective, this is perhaps Leth's support of the aesthetic possibilities of cinema to truly express an

uncoloured sense of realism, in spite of cinema's paradox that it is ontologically unable to accurately reflect reality.

While Leth's camera takes several steps away from the subject to posit meta-commentaries on the relationship between cinema and reality, von Trier's aesthetic instinct is to personally intrude into and to actively provoke the subject's psychic space with a humanistic (yet paradoxical) aim of producing the drama that is, for him, authentic art. While several of his provocations seem arbitrary, there is no doubt that the larger debate he is participating in is about the ability of cinema to yield moments of authentic human expression, whether emotionally or intellectually. This directorial impulse was made manifest in his famously troubled working relationships with actors such as Björk for *Dancer In The Dark* and Nicole Kidman for *Dogville*. In *The Five Obstructions*, one powerful example of this method is the shot of Leth waking up in the hotel room in Brussels, just before heading out to begin the filming for the day. The camera lingers on him as he sits up on the edge of the bed, groaning and mumbling about how difficult the task ahead looks set to be. As it is, Leth is now no longer the director behind the camera, but rather, the subject being examined, and this layer of scrutiny or intrusion clearly unsettles him. Here, the camera presents the picture of an older director, now suffering from a previous melancholia that von Trier suggests stems from the lull and lack of excitement in his artistic production, which von Trier will seek to remedy and reinvigorate through his project. This is evident not only in this particular scene but elsewhere as the camera records Leth's quiet frustrations and discontentment. When one recalls the vibrant portrait of 'the perfect human' in

Leth's original film, it is clear that this heavy-hearted portrait of Leth is indeed an attempt to turn the tables on the director and to deconstruct what 'the perfect director' means. It is in these moments when we see Leth struggling with or even weakened by von Trier's challenges that the camera is recording something real in terms of Leth's emotions and the resultant creative energy, and not the confident, performative self that he projects elsewhere in the documentary. The insistence on pushing actors beyond their psychological comfort zone is an expression of von Trier's preference for a mode of intrusive, controlled chaos that allows for real, authentic creativity to be manifested. As he notes in the film, he finds it more meaningful when actors "screw up," to go so far beyond their own limits that what is produced is genuine emotion captured on camera. This is a motif that we will also see being developed further in his other films, where his provocation of form, narrative, and other related agents such as actors leads to a realism that is at once authentic and raw.

The manner in which such provocation is executed is of interest to this thesis — To what degree does von Trier's control over these agents effect the kind of free play that produces authenticity? What can one make of the inherent contradiction in authenticity being crafted or being manufactured in von Trier's way? The articulation of authenticity here becomes a primary motivation for von Trier to insist on asserting the various obstructions and their attendant rules, since these are the conditions that enable Leth to abandon habits and search for newer creative solutions instead. In other words, in order to move forward and progress in an aesthetic sense, obstructions must be put in place to reveal the deficiencies of

current norms, and to spur one into action and differentiate oneself from such conventional modes. One must indeed be forced, under another's control, to lose control over oneself, so as to discover the sense of excitement and the creative possibilities that were previously beyond one's ken. Therefore, von Trier is the only puppeteer in *The Five Obstructions* and Leth is merely a prop attached to his strings. Several critics declare that Leth "won the game" and that von Trier "failed," portraying the discourse around the film as a match between the two where one necessarily wins while another loses (Schelepern 114, Hjort 36, Macnab). To assign a winner and loser in this film is myopic, in my opinion. While the experiment is indeed framed in the terms of a game, the focus, rather, is the question of creative agency produced by the tension between the two players. Nevertheless the playing field, as it were, is not level from the start, since von Trier is ultimately the filmmaker figure who is solely in control.

The film could be described as von Trier's thesis on the state of cinema, wherein his main argument is that in order for one to progress creatively and to be productive, obstructions and frustrations must be placed before the filmmaker so that an authentic voice can be revealed. In other words, authenticity might be achieved through the interrogation of creative practices when one's artistic control is forcibly inhibited by rules and limitations. Within the frame of *The Five Obstructions*, this authentic voice can be understood in two ways: first, articulated as an opposing response to unimaginative and repetitive aesthetic convention, and second, as the kind of expressive authenticity produced by the newly-invigorated art-making process. In this process, the filmmaker's usual stylistic preferences and

"patterns" must be dismantled and brought into "defocus," a term that von Trier uses in the manifesto accompanying *The Five Obstructions* to describe the poetics of this documentary project. In this manifesto, he acknowledges the ontological point of cinema's artificiality — that what is created in any filmic project is necessarily subjective and a creation of the filmmaker or documentarist. However, he insists that what is of import that must be untainted by style or artifice is the subject matter. This "subject matter" is not to be confused with visual documentation of actual persons or materials that occur in reality. Rather, I posit that von Trier means to describe the verity of human emotion and expression, or human drama, that can be found or coaxed into existence by aesthetic frameworks such as the Dogme ideology or through conceptual experiments such as *The Five Obstructions*. In other words he is searching for the real, unsought emotion that is engendered by moments of artificial construction on the set of a fiction film:

> We are searching for something fictional, not factual. … The subject matter we seek is found in the same reality that inspires fiction-makers; the reality that journalists believe they are describing. But they cannot find this unusual subject matter because their techniques blind them. Nor do they want to find it, because the techniques have become the goal itself. (*FILM #Special Issue*/*Leth* 31)

In this extract we hear the familiar strains of the Dogme 95 manifesto, where the complaint is that the overemphasis on sensation and stylistic artificiality have taken away the authenticity and purity of cinema's power to articulate genuine human expression. This authenticity is rephrased here in 'defocuist' terms as "subject matter" in the documentary. In the case of *The Five Obstructions*, the subject matter is the creation of art through the tension between Leth's aesthetic instincts and von Trier's obstructions. Von Trier seems to suggest that a certain

dismantling is required of the filmmaker's aesthetics in order to reveal the subject matter. Curiously, he states in the film that he wants to "banalise" Leth, a term which indeed expresses the interest of stripping Leth of his aesthetics and practices. The entire project, one might say, is a process of forcibly defocusing and thereby dismantling Leth's "techniques" and aesthetic perfectionism, with the implicit aim of capturing the moments when Leth may "screw up" while working on the remakes. These are the "human" moments that Leth might express in the film which are unplanned, spontaneous, and for von Trier, an instance of the "subject matter" that the documentary intends to reveal.

Towards the end of the film, as Leth and von Trier walk to the studio to record Leth's voiceover for Obstruction #5, Leth expresses concern, good-naturedly, that von Trier will "force [him] to speak quickly." Von Trier replies:

> Oh, no. It must come from within. You're just like those actors, all nervous. Don't be. All your guilt I have taken upon me. You are guiltless. You are like a little child. You don't have to do a thing. Those are the conditions. No rehearsing.
> …
> In my filmic upbringing, what Jørgen calls the rules of the game have always been vital. They are something he introduced into my universe. They are limitations of self-flagellation, if you like. I wanted to impose this flagellation on Jørgen.

An image of von Trier as master puppeteer is present in this quote, while Leth is portrayed as powerless and certainly stripped of control over his own actions in the experiment. Von Trier's remarks highlight again the idea self-limitation and a very harsh method of self-denial where the director must not conform to habit, as is Leth's wont. What von Trier has succeeded in doing is capturing on film the instinctive, unrehearsed spontaneity of Leth's thoughts and emotions. These are the

true, unconscious expressions that would otherwise be masked by Leth's proclivity for controlling the fixed frame of the camera, as well as being in total control as the director in the filmmaking environment.

What links the two directors is the strict adherence to conditions of rules and game-play in their respective artistic careers. Leth writes that he and von Trier "have an appreciation of play, and experiment, and teasing" (*FILM* 31). The element of uncertainty and spontaneity woven into serious aesthetic experimentation is enthusiastically received by the elder filmmaker, who writes, in an e-mail reply to von Trier's initial request, that he "really like[s] the idea about having to change, adjust, and reduce according to given conditions in the process" (*FILM* 31). The game-like quality of this project is closely linked to the idea of the 'human' in the film, as will be expressed later in the chapter, and is the basis upon which von Trier highlights his attempts to convey expressive authenticity in the film. Put briefly, the ultimate goal of the game is to provoke and engender expressive authenticity in his review of the realism in experience that cinema is capable of articulating — it is not limited to artificial posturing of reality, but more significantly, the authentic expressions of thought, action, and truth. Where the notion of truth might emphasise the genuine failings and strengths of an established artist, the related ideas of uncertainty, spontaneity, and how the human navigates his way through such conceptual spaces is just as pertinent to the exploration of authenticity and truth in the film.

From Leth to von Trier; From Perfect to Human

The Perfect Human, Leth's twelve-minute black-and-white film, is a sparse, abstract piece that features a couple in various scenarios. A narrator (Leth, in the original Danish version) describes, in a mock-anthropological voice, the behaviour of a 'perfect' man and woman in a white space. In a series of disconnected scenes featuring the man and woman alternately jumping, smoking, dancing, eating, and sleeping, their activities are examined and explained by the narrator's distant, scientific words. The actors, Claus Nissen and Majken Algren Nielsen, are represented doing typically human things within the confines of the white space, viewed by the camera as though as a zoological exhibit. Despite the gamut of activities, there is no motivation nor understanding of why they do them in the film's narrative. For example, Nissen delivers a blank, inconsequential monologue on "the fleetingness of joy" as he eats a dinner of boiled salmon and potatoes. The monologue is too opaque to be deciphered within the context of the scene, as is the remainder of the film, which touches on diverse yet disconnected topics.

The points to note about *The Perfect Human* are the seeming perfection of the text, its pseudo-documentary effort, and the distant coolness of Leth's camera. As he notes in the documentary, he prefers to "isolate and distance" the subject almost completely, in order to "fully examine it." In this manner, Leth's methodology displays an unwillingness to let himself or the camera intrude too far into the space of the narrative. As we will see, von Trier picks on this particular distance as an aesthetic habit that Leth must shake himself out of. Ponech writes,

"a von Trier victory depends on preventing his opponent from making moves not distinctively Leth's own, on compelling him to work in ways that flout his ingrained preferences" (81). In the words of the *Defocus* manifesto, the "worship of pattern" in the repeated use of this style of distancing has "become the goal itself" in Leth's films. Mid-way through the film, von Trier pronounces, "There are just a few areas in life on which I think I'm an expert. One of them is Jørgen Leth. I think I know considerably more about him than he does. So this entire project has been a 'Help Jørgen Leth' project." What von Trier means by "help" is to put in place this series of challenges to force Leth to produce art. On the one hand, one could view von Trier's experiment as a kind of Oedipal aggression, but it is surely far more complex than that. Rather, von Trier's project is succinctly summarised in his own words to Leth: "I want to banalise you."

Where *The Five Obstructions* seeks to "rediscover" its subject matter by confounding Leth's established modes of creative agency, I argue that von Trier is, in fact, punishing Leth for the entirety of the project. From the outset, it seems that Leth has already 'failed' by von Trier's standards: Leth is perhaps too perfect a filmmaker, and too established and conventional in style and form. In an interesting subversion of the idea of failure and to correct this 'fault' of Leth's, von Trier seeks to subject Leth to more instances of failure through the obstructions; it is von Trier's expectation that Leth will not be able to satisfactorily overcome his limitations. By remaking *The Perfect Human*, a canonical text and a symbol of convention and orthodoxy, von Trier is forcing Leth to give up the agency of ossified style for the purpose of freeing the established filmmaker from these

habits in order to insist upon the value of self-scrutiny and reinvention. In the process, also, it is important for the subject, Leth, to experience the missteps and frustration that accompany the loss of self-control, with the aim of exposing one's true emotions in such moments. In other words, the notion of authenticity in the filmmaking process is characterised by Leth's moments of self-realisation about facing the possibilities of a different way of creating film art. An example of such a moment of authenticity can be perceived in the making of the first obstruction, especially with reference to the limitation of each shot lasting only twelve frames. It is in the humbling moment where Leth realises the vibrancy possible in such shots that he acknowledges his error in initially denouncing it as inferior to his preferred method of filming only long takes. In so doing, von Trier has succeeded in exposing a vulnerability of Leth's while at the same time expressing the value of the losing control as a means for aesthetic change and innovation.

As von Trier notes in the film, his plan is "to proceed from the perfect to the human." An important point to be made here, then, is that each subsequent obstruction is a progressive removal of the director's control over the film, thus paradoxically fulfilling Leth's preference of maintaining an objective distance to the extreme. In this sense, von Trier is distinctly humanising Leth's practice by motivating a more direct and immediate connection between the director and his subject. Within the terms of the game, this subversion of Leth's conception of control and perspective might thus be seen to be the ultimate punishment. At the same time, several questions regarding authorship surface through this experiment. For example, to what extent can a filmmaker claim authorship over the creation of

an animated film (Obstruction #4)? Alternatively, when collage (Obstruction #5) comes into question, who is its real author? In this respect, the real aim, one could argue, is the enterprise of von Trier's to create his own interrogative masterpiece through this exercise designed by him alone. Leth is thus von Trier's test subject for this experiment and, once again, a mere pawn in von Trier's larger creative universe.

Clearly, von Trier has had this in mind from the very beginning of the entire affair. Revealingly, the e-mail to Leth in which he introduces the project already reflects his dominant position in this exchange: despite the uses of "we" in the formulation of challenges, he instructs Leth to remake *The Perfect Human* five times according to his "limitations, commands or prohibitions" (*FILM* 31). On a thematic level, the motif of aesthetic purity through intense provocation is sustained by the framework that enables Leth's willing co-operation with (or subjugation to) von Trier's subjective control. The restrictions for each challenge are not arbitrary, but rather focused attacks on Leth's signature strokes on film. Interestingly, while von Trier plays the role of the 'taskmaster' in such a game, it is Leth who allows and perpetuates a masochistic impulse to punish himself, so to speak. In other words, while it is von Trier who starts the ball rolling at the beginning of each challenge, it is Leth who willingly continues to artistically flog himself further and relinquish even more control. This presents us with the understanding that the control that von Trier asserts over Leth has the effect of snowballing into an exercise in self-denial and self-reflexive interrogation for Leth.

Obstruction #1: 12 frames; answers; Cuba; no set.

The first obstruction presents stylistic turbulence in the form of shots that last no more than twelve frames each. This first constraint immediately attacks Leth on his preference for long, contemplative takes, as explained earlier. In *The Perfect Human*, the dancing scene was shot in one take, the camera unmoving and static throughout the sequence. In relation to the original's anthropological framework, the meditative element in such a shot is immediately absent in the remake, which demands a hectic, frantic mode of editing that is completely at odds with Leth's style. At first, Leth reacts with annoyance at this particular rule after his discussion with von Trier, calling it "cruel, absolutely cruel." Interestingly, this first element of having only twelve frames per shot arose from a dialogue between von Trier and Leth — that is, Leth is complicit in the initial conception of the challenge. In this case, then, it would be useful to consider this as Leth willingly allowing himself to give up control to von Trier's vision.

The other conditions—that Leth must answer the questions posed in the original film, location shooting in Cuba, and that the film must be shot without a set—are all purely of von Trier's formulation. The exchange between the two directors reveals von Trier's cunning in forcing Leth to interrogate his own filmic signature. All these gestures are indeed significant, as they mark a distinct and complete change in the way Leth usually works in his films. That is, the closing of the gap between director and subject and the intimate involvement in editing are both examples of the drastic change that Leth has allowed himself to embrace. In

his aesthetic, such gestures do not represent the purity of his filmmaking, and would thus be understood as a spoiling of his practice. The larger point here is that Leth is relinquishing control over the aesthetic framework of the remake, allowing his usual perfectionist tendencies to be dismantled, and is thereby provoked into a creative mode that is fuelled by necessity since he cannot resort to his usual methods. This weakening of the perfect director's control is part of a broader dynamic that von Trier terms here as becoming 'human' or 'banal.' Leth's use of such alternative techniques as rapid cuts and manipulation of camera speed may seem to him to be crude or unpolished compared to the refined elegance of his black and white original, but that is von Trier's aim: to force Leth to employ banal, stock techniques he would usually detest, or to even resort to techniques that are typically considered shoddy work. An example of this is the repetitive zoom-in to an extreme close-up of the woman's face. The effect is at first jarring, even disturbing, for the viewer, yet the incessant zooming-in develops an exuberant rhythm that consciously reinforces the playful and effervescent tone of the whole remake. During the shoot, Leth first describes this necessity as a weak and clumsy recourse to addressing the challenge, but upon viewing the final product, proclaims the remake as significantly "refreshing." In fact, von Trier is very clear from the beginning that *The Perfect Human* is "a little gem that [he] is now going to ruin," yet what he means is precisely the act of peeling off the layers of artificial and mannered perfection to compel Leth to reconsider the creative possibilities of utilising ordinary techniques. This implies that he finds value in exposing the façade of aesthetic perfection. In this reworking of 'banal' techniques, the expressive authenticity that is coaxed out of Leth reflects the idea of the 'human' in

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artistic endeavours, as compared to the director being a thoroughly structured machine that replicates the same style repeatedly. Again, the motif of innovation through limitation and restriction is expressed here, but the discussion here highlights how this particular mode of innovation is based not solely on discovering new techniques, but rather, it highlights the re-discovery and redefinition of what is termed ordinary, which is a driving concern of von Trier's *oeuvre*.

The result that Leth produces after shooting the new remake in Cuba is exhilarating for him and for the viewer. The rapid cuts contrast sharply with the languid pace of the original, producing an effect of freshness. Victor Shklovsky's concept of *defamiliarization* offered an artistic means of rediscovering the nature of the object, of "overcoming dulled habitual perception" and rendering, as he put it, "the stone stony" (qtd. in Gunning 300). In the same sense, the remake has offered Leth an opportunity to revisit the framing of his original film through a new perspective. Leth's conceptual space is thus transformed, or rather, in his own words, "totally destroyed" by von Trier's rules. He continues to complain that "it'll be a spastic film," a statement that has much resonance with von Trier's own aesthetic that is emphatically expressed in his Dogme film, *Idioterne*. This quality of 'retarded' filmmaking — an *au naturale* practice that eschews mainstream modes of filmmaking in favour of a pared-down aesthetic by using a hand-held camera without artificial sound, light, costume, and so on — expresses a certain authenticity in the creative process, completely without the adornments of a typically conventional Hollywood style. This sense of authenticity is closely linked

to the previous idea of being 'human' or 'banal' that von Trier aims for. Again, Leth is forced to dismantle his own perfectionist streak and use orthodox cosmetic techniques such as saturated colour, exotic locales, lively music, and peppy editing. Through these, Leth is re-examining how his studied, anthropological stance (a fixed camera, black and white, a serene soundtrack) in the original film might be successfully re-presented anew using 'popular' and 'banal' methods. The moment of expressive authenticity for Leth lies in the realisation that such mainstream practices can still present an eloquent remake that explores the same subject as the original film with the same level of impact. Just like the Dogme project, then, von Trier is forcing Leth to re-think his art and its process through the limitations.

Obstruction #1 features colour-saturated, hyperkinetic cuts of a Latino man dancing in a white suit, close-ups of him smoking his cigar, and of a girl lying upon an unmade bed or standing right next to Leth in the film. The same scenes from Leth's black and white original are the polar opposite in terms of style and pace. What is of interest here are the ideas of reinterpretation and control as suggested through the making of this first version. In the act of seemingly wresting control away from Leth by imposing restrictions, von Trier has enabled Leth to re-visualise his method of delivering perfection on film: instead of long takes denoting a measured examination of the object (the couple), *Obstruction #1* performs the same role of expressing the human objects on film, but through energetic and no less intimate shots. Instead of tripping up and being prevented from executing the technical prowess that he is known for, Leth describes himself in the DVD commentary as using the restrictions "to the film's advantage." He

further comments: "It's a very comic effect, but it's also stylistically clean. I am not selling out on the aesthetic perfection. Even with these restrictions … I am still keeping a kind of unifying style." On the one hand, this was the first, somewhat simple, exercise that von Trier set up in order to evaluate Leth's commitment to the project. Von Trier has grasped Leth's weaknesses or aesthetic shortcomings, and accordingly challenged him on those points. On the other hand, we also see von Trier's methodology and mission very clearly: very much like a blind man having his walking stick or guide dog taken away from him, and having to find his way back home without any help. In the meantime, a young boy stands silently nearby, sneakily placing various obstacles before the man to trip him up. Eventually, he does find his way home in one piece, albeit shaken by the experience.

This analogy expresses von Trier's stance — that of trying as far as possible to disrupt Leth's directorial habits to achieve two aims: first, the pretense that he wants to de-rail Leth, to see him 'fall' and thus prompt the elder filmmaker to find some way of 'recovering.' That process of recovery is the thing that von Trier is aiming for in his project, as it is the moment of authenticity where Leth is forced to find solutions to overcome the obstacles that von Trier puts in the way of his filmmaking. Leth remarks:

> I'm known for doing long takes on my films, I'm known for demanding a lot of patience from my audience with my long takes. So now he's asking me to deconstruct my film by cutting it up, totally, wildly. … Thereby, nearly committing suicide.

The immense cruelty, as it were, is not without a purpose. This leads to the second aim, that von Trier's pretense of imposing harsh restrictions and punishments

enables him to witness and record genuine moments of expressive authenticity at work as Leth is inspired to find ways to work with the obstructions. As if to reflect this desire, the documentary frequently interrupts the scenes of Leth at work with the cinematographer and the actors, and each section is punctuated by a short extract from *The Perfect Human*. The 'interruption' for Obstruction #1 features the scene where the narrator reads, "We are going to watch the perfect human at work," as Claus Nissen adjusts his bowtie. The cutaway is appropriately resonant here, as it underlines von Trier's ultimate project in making *The Five Obstructions*: not just to create a portrait of Leth – the 'perfect filmmaker' – at work, but also to showcase the authenticity of his aesthetic formulation, while simultaneously heightening that filmmaker's self-awareness of his methods and motivate his self-scrutiny through this project in aesthetic experimentation.

Obstruction #2: The most miserable place; Don't show it, Jørgen Leth is the man; the meal.

If Obstruction #1 was an exercise in humility, then Obstruction #2 would be acute psychological torture. As the two men discuss the possibilities for the second obstruction, Leth again allows himself to be tortured. Now, this torture is no longer on a purely aesthetic level. Von Trier has moved it up one notch to include an ethical dilemma for Leth. Leth identifies Falkland Road, a red-light area in Mumbai, to be the location for the second remake. Descriptions of Falkland Road mark it as a place that is "a tiny island of chaos [that is] continuing to choke on

gross neglect" (Menen). It is a dismal area where young and old, men and women alike, continue their existence as sex workers without complaint nor grudge. Ironically, it is also a place of energy and colour, as seen in the lively expressions of the locals who populate the scene where Leth scouts the area before shooting. Nevertheless, there is a sense of hopelessness and wretchedness in the existence of the place, as Leth notes in the film. For him, Falkland Road represents a failure of humanity, but perhaps more so, a physical and visual representation of his own predilection for contradiction.

To film a scene in which he shaves before eating a gourmet meal dressed in a formal shirt and dinner jacket against the backdrop of a derelict neighbourhood is most definitely a challenge of ethics in filmmaking. What von Trier attacks now is Leth's ethics as an observer, a role that he frequently adopted in his *oeuvre* thus far. While Leth must film the remake in the 'most miserable place,' von Trier also stipulates that the location cannot be revealed on the screen at all. An imposition on twelve frames per shot was already, for Leth, something "very hurtful" and an interesting twist in the restrictions. In the first obstruction, Leth had already lost a measure of his control over the aesthetic of the film, yet at the same time found a new perspective in working around it. This time, however, his role now demands a perversion of his ethics as a filmmaker, especially as it concerns maintaining a greater distance between himself and the humanitarian quagmire that surrounds his crew. In their pre-shoot discussion, Leth and von Trier discuss the ethical limits of what a filmmaker can or cannot record on camera, for example, filming a dying child in a refugee camp while the narration from *The Perfect Human* is being

recited. Leth insists that he is not perverted, and von Trier counters his comment with the fact that there is already a certain degree of inhumanity in how Leth maintains a distance between himself and the subject of his documentary. Rightly so, then, von Trier picks on Leth's statement, "The observer is my role. It is my instinct." Having identified this other quality or habit of Leth's, von Trier then seeks to extend Leth's preference for distance and imposes the strict rule that the 'miserable location' cannot be shown on screen at all. For all the sympathy and affect that could have been garnered from a glimpse of the human despair that is Falkland Road, von Trier disallows it, thereby dismantling Leth's agency and instinct as a director to reveal social truth. It is almost akin to an adult force-feeding a child excessive amounts of candy after having caught the child stealing some from the kitchen — a form of aversion therapy that recalls the Ludovico Technique from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. The literary allusion is not arbitrary; it should be clarified that von Trier's "laboratory experiment," as he coins it in the documentary, amounts to a similar mode of subtle cruelty and moral torment for Leth. He has been barred from making major aesthetic decisions in this second remake, as most of the major points have already been dictated by von Trier. This evidently challenges his role as an artist, and has been relegated the role of merely executing the commands of another auteur. Ultimately, and this is what von Trier is most interested in, will Leth break down under the pressure of the social environment in this particular impoverished area of Mumbai?

Before leaving for Mumbai, Leth privately notes that it is "pure romanticism in quantifying how much the 'social drama' can affect one," and this

scene is immediately followed by a long shot of him seated in a car that is stuck in the local traffic. In an earlier scene, while in his hotel room, he explains his scientific stand that there is no physical law that one can witness only so much until one reaches the limit where a breakdown is inevitable. The car scene that comes right after, however, disputes his rationality head-on. A woman beggar and her infant child are on the road, begging Leth for ten rupees through the car window. The discomfort in Leth's response is interesting. He first dismisses the woman coolly, carefully avoiding eye-contact, but then buckles quickly under pressure from his own guilt and hands ten rupees to her. This intentional juxtaposition of Leth's academic response to the rhetoric of the challenge in the preceding scene and his instinctual response to the reality of his situation is both humorous and acerbic at the same time, as one is immediately reminded of how von Trier's cynicism triumphs over the idealism of his 'victims,' as it were. Without von Trier's direct involvement, Leth has tripped himself up and undercut his own rationalisation. This short but awkward scene is filled with lengthy pauses after the car moves on, in which Leth initially projects an air of nonchalance, but ends up exposing this guilt. Appropriately, this is exactly the kind of scene that von Trier has sought to find in filming Leth at work — that of an imperfect, 'human' Leth. As a play on *The Perfect Human* and the idea of Leth as the perfect human/ filmmaker, perfection is equated with the absence of human qualities or weaknesses and especially of being flawless. Similarly, the idea of being 'human' in von Trier's milieu embraces imperfection and suggests an authentic mode of expressing art. According to von Trier's aesthetic philosophy, ossified perfection is the death of creativity and authenticity in art-making. His is a romantic ideal, as

Leth notes, and the 'inhumanity' of Leth as exposed here carries the weight of von Trier's determination to interrupt Leth's cool-headed principles and methodology to fuel genuine frustration and produce that treasured burst of psychological activity that nurtures original thinking.

As a result of his revulsion and shame at himself for having chosen (rather, *revealed* to von Trier) the red-light district as the most miserable location to shoot a film, Leth decides to subvert the rule that the location cannot be shown. Instead of a white sheet, Leth and crew decide to reveal their location by stretching a framed, translucent sheet of plastic behind Leth as he dines, wearing a tuxedo. The curious crowd behind this screen is clearly seen, all dressed in their ordinary clothes, shifting amongst each other to get a better view of what the camera is filming. The viewer's eyes are not focused on Leth in the foreground consuming his gourmet meal, but rather, distracted by the movement and expressions of the people behind the screen. Leth's intentions here are manifold: as the subject of von Trier's experiment, he is obstinately reacting against von Trier's stipulation that the location cannot be shown.

Within the framework of the challenge, Leth has created the space (visually and conceptually) within which his resistance works to produce his critique of this particular ethical bind: should one reveal the scene of human depravity in order to elicit debate and criticism – one of the functions of art – or should one eschew moral obligation in the service of the higher ideals of aesthetics in the form of the Obstruction? His answer to these two questions is ambiguous, and the choice of a

translucent screen reflects the moral conundrum he is faced with, yet does not wish to fully embrace and make a decision about. Since von Trier's rule is that the location cannot be shown, and since Leth feels that not revealing the depravity of the locale is completely reprehensible on a moral front, he addresses this challenge via the use of the framed plastic sheet. It is at once a straightforward metaphor for the porosity of cinematic art between reel and real life, and also a metaphor for the latent exasperation at his pathetic position as a filmmaker from the First World, as it were, humming a superficial lyric — "Why is happiness so fickle?" — in a setting of abject Third World poverty and misery. The hollow monologue harbours no intention to make a critical comment on the setting, although one suspects that Leth would have liked to. The performance that follows reflects that moment of expressive authenticity in which we witness a visible clash of art and morality. His performance is pained, as though forced under threat of death to recite the lines, and he is visibly disturbed at the knowledge of the stark contrast between the bubble of his formal dinner set-up and the reality of human depravity around the set. Here is the 'perfect human' in the midst of humanity uncovered. Therefore, to assess if Leth has indeed gained a measure of control back from von Trier (and thereby 'winning' this challenge), one must consider Leth's prior criticism of von Trier's 'romanticism,' where the aim was to unsettle and destabilise Leth's dependence on the observer role by turning him into an unwilling participant in the drama of the setting. Consequently, the drama produced in Leth's frustrated reactions signals the success of von Trier's project of revealing a portrait of his 'imperfect filmmaker.'

What has been achieved, then, in this tussle between morality and aesthetics? On the one hand, von Trier has managed to move Leth one step further away from the conceptual aspect of filmmaking by laying down the restrictions that the latter must follow. Leth is at once made a tool of von Trier's experiment and is stripped, for this remake, of his agency as a creative individual at the same time. On the other hand, and this is the more crucial point, Leth as the formalist has had to find the middle ground between satisfying the conditions of the challenge and his personal "die-hard indifference to art's ethical dimensions," albeit with little success (Livingston 64). As a filmmaker with strong documentarist leanings and as one who insists on playing the observer, Leth would have approached the scene in Falkland Road with as little direct involvement as possible, ensuring his usual distance between the camera and the subject. However, he is faced with the ethical dilemma of the situation — that, on the one hand, it would be immoral to feature the destitute people of Falkland Road as a convenient 'prop' to invoke sympathy, and yet on the other hand, it would be just as immoral to exclude them from the film as per von Trier's instruction. This glaring temptation to allow his ethical sensibilities as a human being to influence the production of the artistic project has resulted in a process of personal reflection and severe questioning of his own practices as a filmmaker. By this assessment, then, von Trier has shaken the cinematic monolith that is Jørgen Leth to the core, prompting the latter to re-examine and redefine his artistry and ethics, something that the director has not quite been willing to do before. This is certainly a major concern of von Trier's: that cinema should expand and extend ways of thinking

and perceiving for the author and viewer, "leading beyond ordinary frames of expectation towards the new, the unseen, the unthought" (Rodriguez 40).

From the viewer's point of view, what one witnesses is an interesting documentary of a noted director at possibly his weakest, and most 'human.' It is interesting that the footage of Leth is shot exactly as he would have executed it: with long, unmoving takes, focusing on Leth, the 'perfect human.' Not only do we see him in a confused state regarding the remake's restrictions, but also as an elder man losing touch with his principles of his craft, yet at the same time discovering something about himself:

> This was a picture from hell. We shot the film. I was cold-blooded and I had no scruples. I thought, 'Damn it, we can do this!' Then I had a nightmare after that. Two nights. I had one of those rare nightmares you remember when you wake up. The analytical thought occurred to me that there was something Faust-like about it. A pact.

The nightmare that Leth refers to has its physical source in the dinner scene, in which he, the lone white man, consumes a meal of grilled fish with various condiments in front of a crowd of locals who are the picture of misery and hunger. There is indeed a severe degree of melodramatic perversion that, for a purist like Leth, conflicts with his motivation to present an objective, detached study of 'reality.' He explains that his own methodology focuses on detachment instead of melodrama: "I'm an observer, not a participant. I hate documentaries that bring all the answers with them" (qtd. in Brooks). Von Trier's provocation then throws into question the fundamental drive of Leth's art. His confusion and his conundrum is now the subject of von Trier's study, and in a neat summary, the line uttered by Leth in the earlier shaving scene ironically resonates with his state of mind:

"Today I experienced something that I hope to understand in a few days." The phrase on its own has no point of reference, and has no semantic meaning until one reads the phrase as a meta-textual comment uttered by Leth, the director, about the project he is involved in. The important point to note here is how the scene has effected the emergence of his desire to comprehend, rationalise, and re-think that which he thought to be stable and 'pure' — his art.

Obstruction #3: Back to Bombay or Free-style film

At his own refusal to return to Mumbai to re-shoot Obstruction #2, Leth then takes the option of producing a 'free-style' remake of *The Perfect Human*. This task proves difficult within the framework of the challenge, for there is no indication from von Trier as to what considerations or restrictions are attached to this particular remake. On the one hand, there is no challenge, but on the other hand, perhaps von Trier's lack of instruction is intended to allow Leth the opportunity to create his own obstruction. At the other end of the spectrum, this move articulates von Trier's thesis that it is impossible for art to express ideas with authenticity if there is no framework to react against. That said, the idea and term "free-style" has several meanings here, the first of which suggests a certain freedom, with a positive connotation, to film what one wants with respect to theme and subject matter. Second, it suggests the freedom to not work with any established style, to be free of any recognisable, conventional mode of expression whatsoever. The latter might present itself as the immediate benefit of having free reign over the

production of this third remake, but the lack of defined parameters has its advantages and disadvantages. While this may, at first glance, seem to be a sigh of relief where Leth might feel less encumbered in a creative sense, the freedom presented here is in fact another form of obstruction.

In essence, Obstruction #3 is Leth's punishment for not following the rules, and this freedom challenges him in that he must now address the task of formulating a remake *without* instruction. He is robbed in Obstruction #1, so to speak, of his aesthetic signature, then in the second, his ethical sensibilities are attacked cruelly, and now, he has nothing by way of artistic motivation. Where Obstruction #1 distanced Leth from a small measure of aesthetic choice, and where Obstruction #2 forced Leth to examine his fundamental elements of methodology, Obstruction #3 completely removes any start or end-point from which Leth may orientate his aesthetic decisions, and in this sense, removes the Other against which his artistic identity may assert itself. However, it will be argued in this section that the lack of restrictions indeed present another layer of complexity in engendering expressive authenticity in the filmmaking experiment. I argue that the authentic in this remake is instead Leth's failure to articulate a clear aesthetic response to the challenge. In this Obstruction, since Leth was given full control over the remake but yet 'failed,' von Trier has proven that it is essential to lose control to induce authenticity in one's art.

While Leth exudes confidence in this third remake, not having any restriction to work with or against reveals a general sense of directionless on Leth's

part, and this is emphatically reflected in the five full minutes of Leth wandering in the labyrinth of hotel corridors, looking somewhat unsuccessfully for the hotel room in which the crew and actors are. While he has decided on a *noir*-style retelling of the original with open-ended motions, it is clear that the use of genre to drive the look and shape of the film was one of convenience, and not a decision arising from a thorough exploration of "what *The Perfect Human* should be in 2002," as suggested by von Trier. The end-product looks slick and captures the seeming insouciance of a director too entrenched in his self-assured sense of style. Yet, it seems more viable to assert that the gloss of the film camouflages the lack of focus and elliptical movement. When one recalls that the original lacked elements of plot with the intent to present a purely abstract visual aesthetic, suggestions of a plot in Obstruction #3 through the introduction of such diegetic elements as the weapon, exterior locations, and dialogue look like attempts to simply invert and present a binary opposite of the original. Such a strategy cannot produce any innovation nor can it approach the kind of transformative paradigm that von Trier is hoping to elicit. My point here is that Leth is plainly grasping at an easy way out of Obstruction #3 in order to escape and avoid the aesthetic demands of the entire challenge.

One could read this as a disavowal of the terms of the challenge, but perhaps a more coherent understanding might fall upon the suggestion that Leth is asserting what he thinks to be *his* control over the project in this third round. As a reaction against his powerless ethical perplexity experienced in Mumbai, Obstruction #3, for Leth, is a prime opportunity to feature his prowess with the

medium. However, the entire point of *The Five Obstructions* was to evoke a re-examination of Leth's own comfort zone in filmmaking by dismantling and disassembling his conventions of style. As Rodriguez notes, from von Trier's perspective, "subjection, not the pursuit of aesthetic value, is the core focus of the enterprise" (51). Its opposing stand, submission, in von Trier's framework, leads to a process of purification that benefits the auteur—in that the challenge for Leth was to surrender his aesthetic routines to rework and redefine such conventions through different perspectives. In order for that level of innovation to occur, one must first engage in severe self-scrutiny by having one's aesthetic control completely taken away before gaining a new, and a redefined perspective. Here, in this Obstruction, Leth's methodology has not fundamentally altered in the manner desired by von Trier: there was no emotional incertitude and he still holds dearly on to his highly polished, but distanced style of the observer. There has thus been no innovation nor change in Leth's style in this remake, and he even goes further to emulate the conventions of the *noir* genre. The 'punishment' was designed to distance Leth from the sense of masterful control that an auteur expects to have over his artistic process — a punishment that foregrounds the act of 'defocusing' as central to the artist's struggle for authenticity in his art. Hence, despite the seemingly successful production of the third remake, the irony remains that it was also a failure since the punishment failed to evoke the kind of significant change and aesthetic purification that von Trier was aiming for.

Therefore, von Trier has yet again demonstrated the need for parameters as provocations to yield the conceptual space within which experimentation and new

ideas may be generated. As Caroline Bainbridge notes, von Trier's suggestion is that the "imposition of rules will always elicit interpretations of the rules that, in turn, produce originality within their very terms" (160). Bringing the argument to a meta-textual level, one extrapolates from Leth's situation the idea that von Trier has also imposed a certain degree of defocusing, by leaving Leth to his own devices in Obstruction #3. Yet, despite von Trier's earlier exhortation to "screw up," which he sees as "the greatest gift … to a director," Leth still managed to pull off Obstruction #3 without much self-reflexive experimentation vis-à-vis his craft. In other words, there was no creative struggle for Leth, and therefore, no truth achieved. Seeing that giving Leth the *appearance* of having full control over his remake has not resulted in a radical redesign in Leth's aesthetic identity, one might categorise the third experiment as a defeat for von Trier. Still, I emphasise that the actual success of the remake is in its proof that von Trier's thesis stands. The defeat prompts his next drastic move that subjects Leth to the other extreme: stripping him of all control. Obstruction #4 thus seeks to symbolically remove Leth even further from the text by refiguring the mode of expression completely into that of animation.

Obstruction #4: Cartoon

Both directors profess their profound hatred for the genre of animation at the start of the next challenge. As auteurs who use the film camera to drive their humanist project after the style of Astruc's *camerá-stylo*, the animated film represents the

intrusion of artificial and 'dehumanised' mechanisms, completely at odds with their conception of cinema as an authentic mode of expressing reality and humanity through art. As the previous obstruction did not achieve its goal of radically destabilising Leth's trademark style, von Trier now attempts again with the specific aim of provoking the feeling of being like a "tortoise on its back." The challenge, then, is for the subject to find some way to get back on his feet and move again. Von Trier emphasises the need to be paralysed and to let go of one's control over the filmmaking process as an essential step one must take, somewhat akin to a process of purification. In this short exchange, the two directors discuss the dialectic of power and control:

Von Trier: The trouble with you is you're so clever that anything I say inspires you.

Leth: I isolate places and things that I want to examine precisely. That's my method. I frame them precisely. … I believe strongly in waiting and observing.

Von Trier: When I am at work, and something turns out to be pure crap, I ask myself why — the answer is because of something I can't control.

Leth: It's of no interest if control is the only thing. I believe blindly that if you arrange a sluice or a frame, something will happen that you can't control. I love it when things get out of control.

Von Trier: I'm going to make a very simple rule. I can't imagine it'll be anything but crap. And let's say it'll be all right if it is crap. I'd be thrilled if it is crap. But there is one single condition. It's got to be a cartoon. The great thing about it being a cartoon is that you'll be faced with loads of decisions. The aesthetics and all that crap. It can only turn out to be crap.

Von Trier's last remark is revealing for its focus on Leth having to make "loads of decisions," which is the extreme opposite of what Leth professes to believe in: to allow the subject to present itself within the frame of the director's camera. According to von Trier, then, an animation will present no such opportunity for the subject matter, where all aesthetic points must be strictly dictated and predetermined. For both directors, such a set-up can only produce "crap" in the sense that the element of experimentation and play is minimised almost completely. In fact, the opposite is underlined: artificiality. The depth of experiential authenticity that is attached to a filmed realism gives way to the gross artificiality inherent in the cartoon genre. There, an auteur cannot 'defocus,' but rather, he must eschew the subject matter in favour of the superficial and the cosmetic. Furthermore, an animation represents the apogee of the "illusionary immersion and technological awe" that von Trier ironically scorns in the Dogme scheme (Simons 163). Fittingly, Leth proclaims in the film that he "can't be bothered" and would sooner pass on the conceptualisation of the film to someone else than "sit before a drawing board, sketching images on paper."

Yet, after the discussion with von Trier, Leth enthusiastically speaks about his plan for the 'cartoon' while at his second home in Port-au-Prince. Footage from the original film will be used alongside a small number of new images. However, he emphasises that both will be presented to not look recycled or repeated. He speaks further about "breath[ing] freshness" into the project by using the old footage "actively, [and] write a new text into it with a new context." At this point, Leth is pre-empting what von Trier actually expects from the project, that the result

will look "sloppy or stupid." Nevertheless, by pitching his stand against von Trier's expectations, Leth is actively engaging with the constraint set against him, and an expressive workaround is employed to allow him to meet the constraint, and ironically avoid it personally at the same time. The tension between the two directors thus produces the dynamic that drives Leth's creative output. The result is a hybrid film, where real, filmed footage is rotoscoped with a fluid veneer of artificial colours and animation; it is a liminal text that is neither fully animated nor completely a live action film.

Even so, a further point here is that in an animation, besides the narrative, the director paradoxically has a lesser degree of control concerning the prescription of the general aesthetic; the much finer steps of the creative process lie in the hands of the animator, who, in this remake, is Bob Sabiston. Leth's choice of collaborator sets up a deeper level of complexity in the discussion about directorial agency: Sabiston is famed for creating the computer-automated rotoscoping technique of animating live footage that has since been employed in several films.[7] The actual rendering of the animation thus lies in the power of the Rotoshop software, and hence removes Leth even further away from the creative process. At this point, one notices the irony that despite Obstruction #4 being thrust upon Leth as something that demands "loads of decisions," as von Trier describes it, it is also an exercise in which the director's role is relegated to the background, with no direct contact, as it were, with the making of the animation. While his initial

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[7] The Rotoshop software he developed was embraced by mainstream Hollywood and television. See *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), directed by Richard Linklater.

response was outrage, Leth later becomes excited about the project, simply because it is something he has never embarked on before in his career. However, this enthusiasm seems misplaced in the larger scheme of the challenge. In writing about the Oulipo writers,[8] Hector Rodriguez notes that the construction of a new constraint can be seen as a "vehicle of artistic progress, as the invention of a new technique" (47). Rotoscoping is indeed *not* a new technique discovered by Leth, to say the least, but while on his way to Sabiston's office in Austin, Texas, he reveals that just about all of the idea-making process has been left to Sabiston alone: "We know that we want him to suggest ways of making a cartoon based on *The Perfect Human*. Has he already got a few ideas? Has he got anything to show us? It'll be exciting to meet him. … That's the solution we have come up with." Hence, the solution that Leth has found is to delegate the creative work to the animator, and it is "a solution that nevertheless satisfies [him]." The point here is that Obstruction #4 problematises the question of authorship in the animated remake: Does one attribute its creation to Sabiston, Leth, or von Trier, who is the overall architect of the project? The ambiguity of the position of an authorial voice, Rodriguez writes, is perhaps a prime aspect of von Trier's project. This particular uncertainty extends itself into a larger discussion about von Trier's understanding of directorial identity vis-à-vis creative agency, a theme that will be discussed in a later section.

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[8] Oulipo, the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, is a collective of writers and mathematicians founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960. The experimental group explores alternative modes of writing fiction and poetry, "by using patterns and constraints often inspired from mathematical models, but always in a playful spirit" <http://www.oulipo.net/oulipiens/O>.

Tempered by the use of film material from the original, artfully combined with footage from the last three Obstructions, the product of Sabiston's and Leth's collaboration reworks iconic scenes from the various visual texts with a depressive tone. The narrator drones "disinclination" repeatedly in the beginning, over the lethargic image of a tortoise crawling across the screen and the image of Leth shaving in Mumbai. This strong reference to mundane routine and habit is clearly self-ironic as Leth acknowledges von Trier's ploy to trip him up creatively. Indeed, he found the assignment to be a severe burden at the outset. Yet, it is a deceptive and humorous opening, as the rest of the short film projects a sense of euphoria at having discovered a collaborative solution to the obstruction. Leth provided Sabiston with material from his other film essays, *Good and Evil* (*Det gode og det onde*, 1975) and *Notes on Love* (*Notater om kærligheden*, 1989), which also featured Claus Nissen and a similar *noir*-like atmosphere as the footage from Obstruction #3. There is a conscious effort to connect the scenes from each separate film to each other, offering a sort of personal essay featuring common motifs that Leth reiterates through his oeuvre: observation, human behaviour in an enclosed space, restriction and freedom, sexuality, and an individual's journey towards self-awareness, especially images of travelling into an unknown destination.

Two things must be noted here: First, Obstruction #4 is indeed an alluring pastiche of Leth's earlier work, and second, the employment of Sabiston as collaborator has allowed Leth to disengage from the challenge significantly. We are shown scenes where Leth visits Sabiston's workplace, in which Leth selects from a

range of images that Sabiston had previously worked on. He directs the latter as to which images he likes, and which images appeal not to him. What both points reveal is that while the cartoon was indeed "a beautiful film" as von Trier admits after viewing it, its charm obscures the fact that it was an exercise in inauthenticity on Leth's part, for his only achievement in this fourth remake was to simply direct the rearrangement of his previous footage in an animated form, and thus avoid the challenge of learning how to work with digital animation directly. As a result, we may conclude that once again, Leth has side-stepped the crux of the entire project.

When placed in the context of authorship, this remake creates further complexity in the link between author and art, and also recalls the ethics of the director. To what extent can Leth claim that this is *his* remake when the majority of the creative work is actually done by someone else? In any case, the same question can be asked of any director, as a film project is never quite the work of one individual, but always already a collaboration between director, cameraman, cast, editor, and other crew members. A more pertinent argument arises where von Trier bemoans the idea that the humanist project of cinema, as a plastic mode of expression and self-examination, is suppressed by formulaic filmmaking and over-reliance on cosmetic technology. Here, the animated genre falls squarely into this discussion as the rotoscoping mechanism is not only a manifestation of this inauthenticity, but goes further to transform and colour the filmed material with the veneer of counterfeit realism. The more important point is that Leth, even as the author of the source material, has not had much to do with the making of the animation at all, in contravention of von Trier's project of aesthetic self-

rejuvenation. What von Trier is struggling with is the very ontology of cinema: the mechanised nature of filmmaking and the camera, and how, already on a base level, it removes the human from the process of capturing and expressing reality, as it were. Already, a common criticism that von Trier has frequently applied to Leth's work is that his films are "far too cerebral and detached" (Macnab). Yet in this Obstruction, his gambit — by forcing Leth's hand in prescribing a cartoon format — has failed to budge Leth from his position of distance. Consequently, von Trier's conception of Obstruction #5 acknowledges the impossibility of influencing a profound change in the senior director's artistic habits, and thus, presents a *faux* self-portrait of not only Jørgen Leth, but of Lars von Trier as well.

Obstruction #5: 'Lars von Trier will make the last obstruction. Jørgen Leth will be credited as director. Leth will read a text written by von Trier.'

On several levels, this last remake perplexes the viewer as it confronts the notion of the author on several fronts, wielding conflicting interpretations at first sight. Obstruction #5 is a carefully constructed bricolage of visual material from the past Obstructions, and is von Trier's admission that his experiment has not succeeded in reshaping Leth's aesthetic experience. That is the ostensible understanding. Be that as it may, a further reading of Obstruction #5 reveals that this is really von Trier's assertion that *The Five Obstructions* is an exercise in exposing the fiction of the auteur in control of his art. In a much larger context, we see that this is von Trier's means of struggling with the question of the self and identity as an auteur.

Immediately, the reigning motif of control versus play comes to the fore in this last segment of the documentary, as though von Trier is reminding not only Leth but the viewer as well, that the game of disguise and deceit has concluded and that the players may now unmask themselves to reveal the 'true self' behind the façade. This emphatic focus on the agency and value inherent in the authentic, creative self becomes evident where the final Obstruction leaves Leth completely obstructed from even performing his role as director: "The ultimate obstruction will be that you do nothing at all." Instead, his name and directorial identity will be manipulated by von Trier like a marionette. The struggle over authorship for this documentary ends thusly: von Trier will have the final say — not that it was a matter of contention in any case, as it was always von Trier who architected the movement and narrative of the text. Two themes of essence here, which will conclude this chapter, are authenticity and identity.

Again, here are echoes of the Dogme proposition that one must first relinquish all modes of artifice and control of one's art, to allow an authentic self-expression to surface. For example, von Trier established that setting stylistic elements of filmmaking free — such as the camera — and using only on-site elements greatly increased conditions for "expressiveness, authenticity and spontaneity" in the acting (Piil). In Obstruction #5, von Trier takes it several steps further to the level of the narrative, where the direction of the documentary about Leth is left to play itself out freely within the specified boundaries of the challenges he has issued to Leth. Hence, he has captured a genuine record and an authentic portrait of a prominent filmmaker struggling to assert and experiment

with his craft in the face of aesthetic limitations. In this case, Leth faces the most difficult task, which is to willingly relinquish total control over this fifth remake, and become the subject matter that von Trier has set up to reveal. By doing so, he has effectively crossed over the division that he previously drew between observer and the observed. On a meta-textual level, this arrangement thus demonstrates the value of Leth's involvement in the project for von Trier, and that is the objective he seeks to achieve: the authentic portrait of Leth's artistic struggles. That is, Obstruction #5 and *The Five Obstructions* are taken together as von Trier's own remake of *The Perfect Human*: Jørgen Leth, film director.

Von Trier reveals that he will be using material of Leth at work on the first four Obstructions, and he remarks: "Hopefully, we captured something human as we talked." As discussed earlier, "human" equates with truth and authenticity, which is achieved by "banalising" Leth — that is to say, Leth must be knocked off his pedestal and be forced to confront the true social and emotional dimension of his art directly on a human level, and not from a pseudo-godly distance. He must be a participant, and not a detached observer as he is inclined to be. Thus, the endeavour to be "human" in von Trier's framework demands that one must expose and embrace one's weaknesses, and ought to 'fall' in a romantic sense. As is appropriate, frustration and profound internal struggle must accompany these elements in order for one to be worthy of being labelled "human." To some extent, Leth certainly exhibited such traits in the making of Obstructions #1 through #4, yet without the sense of a thoroughly emotional breakdown that might inspire a monumental reshaping of his aesthetic objectives. While in Mumbai, Leth remarks

that von Trier has the idealised notion of placing him squarely in the midst of social drama for the purpose of eliciting 'truth' from his filmmaking: "He wants to quantify how much it rubs off, how much it affects me. Will it be visible? Will it be quantifiable? But I think it's pure romanticism." He also mentions in a succeeding interview with Xan Brooks: "Lars has this crazy theory that truth comes out if you are broken. And I don't agree with that. It is a romantic and sentimental notion. He wanted me to break down. But it will not happen not with me."

The unwavering refusal to allow himself to be emotionally and aesthetically affected by von Trier's impediments was mostly maintained throughout the various challenges, but the more compelling moments were the instances in the documentary where Leth is shown initially contemplating the challenge, the exasperation clearly conveyed through his expression and remarks to the camera. Yet, the verve with which he delves into finding solutions to the Obstruction sets up the dynamic wherein the obstructed filmmaker now reclaims control over the project and sets about asserting his personal artistic methodology, a tendency that is, ironically, supposed to be prohibited by the very Obstruction itself. Therefore, one could certainly argue that while Leth might have struggled in the preliminary conceptualisation of his remakes, he has largely held a firm hand over the making of them, and in no way has he completely relinquished his artistic voice through Obstructions #1 to #4. His authorial identity remains intact.

In spite of that, Obstruction #5 presents Leth with the extreme version of the first four challenges: von Trier has divested him of all authorial control. In fact,

Leth's only tangible involvement in this remake is his voice — he provides the narration of a script written by von Trier that is in the form of a letter 'penned' by Leth and addressed to von Trier. Von Trier frames the letter such that Leth is positioned as the mentor admonishing the pupil, clearly expressed through the opening which reads, "Dear, silly Lars." On the surface, 'Leth' appears to be chastising von Trier about his attempt to "unmask" him and the artifice of his technical perfection to reveal the "human human" beneath. The narrative of the letter takes on several voices — all of which are ultimately uttered by von Trier. First, there is 'Leth' as the main narrative voice, and second, 'Leth as von Trier.' On top of that is the third, meta-textual voice, 'von Trier as Leth,' where von Trier renders Leth's persona from his perspective. The fourth voice, also the point of origin, is von Trier's. Nowhere in this configuration do we see or hear Leth himself represented, except in the illustrative images that accompany the voiceover text.

Alter-egos aside, what is the significance of von Trier's intricate and convoluted structure of this last remake? One suggestion is that since the entire enterprise of *The Five Obstructions* was, as stated before, to seek the human and the authentic in Leth, the bricolage of narratives simply highlights von Trier's concerns about purity of aesthetic expression and correspondingly, the question of the auteur in this matrix. To go further with this argument, the auteur's artistic identity is not a solipsistic, monolithic self, but rather, a diverse persona that relies on its interaction with other creative influences for its construction. The recognition of this idea of multiple selves reflects the sort of expressive authenticity that von Trier seeks, in that the auteur self-reflexively foregrounds his

aesthetic convictions while simultaneously cross-examining them. Neither Leth nor von Trier are excluded from this conception of the auteur as an amalgamation of 'selves,' while the complicated utterance of the letter and its accompanying visual track have provided a strong comment on the workings of such auteurship.

By crediting and highlighting Leth as the director of this piece, von Trier is demonstrating the complexity involved in the process of identifying the locus of influence of the auteur. It is not that von Trier strictly believes the contemporary filmmaker still has an exclusive role as a singular creative force (and this is a self-reflexive matter of concern for von Trier), but it rather seems as though he is continuing the debate about how the author can still express this authentic authorial voice and beliefs in the face of technological superficiality in cinema. As von Trier's project is humanist in nature, it is essential for him that the director's agency is foregrounded through the challenges. As he has emphasised in several interviews and through his films, he is not one for post-structuralist and anti-humanist tendencies in art, which reject the subject as a stable entity. As his project is to "banalise" Leth and to reveal the "human" in him, what von Trier is seeking for both Leth and to a greater extent, himself, is the expression of individuality of the auteur and his control over his art. The cinematic style and language through which the auteur 'speaks' are but means to express his artistic identity in a dynamic form and more importantly, to assert his authorial voice.

An auteur does not do this in a vacuum, however, as his artistic identity must be formed with reference to (or in defiance of) other auteurs and styles. This

is another point that is illustrated through von Trier's challenges, where the interrogation of Leth's style and aesthetic direction in the remakes are shaped by his (both positive and negative) interpretations of von Trier's limitations. Leth's aesthetic contribution, as it were, is formed through this tug-of-war between them. After all, *The Five Obstructions* is aimed at revealing to Leth what his 'true' artistic identity is: "They've shown me what I really am, an abject, human human." At the same time, the struggle that von Trier has regarding his own artistic identity is made clear through the same dynamic. In other words, for von Trier, as with Leth, the question of self-disclosure comes into play, as the multiple threads that meet in Obstruction #5 reflect an internal dialogue that von Trier is having with himself about the value and worth of being labelled as an auteur. The letter opens with a discussion about von Trier's association with Leth and his aim of letting out Leth's "inner scream" through the documentary project. He also acknowledges his own arrogance in assuming that he could influence a change in Leth's perfectionist aesthetic habits through the challenges. On the one hand, the 'Leth' that is speaking in the letter seems to gain the upperhand, claiming to von Trier, "Your theory didn't stand up, Lars. Your pedagogical mission didn't get to grips." The triumphant tone is dominant in the first three paragraphs, in which the excessive confidence with which such lines are uttered belies the real Leth reading the text, who is attempting to downplay and avoid acknowledgement of the letter's veiled critique of himself by deviating from the disparaging intonation that von Trier intends. For example, while reading the line that makes direct reference to the distanced, high intellectualism in his aesthetic that acts as a mask and cover-up for his unstable personal self and artistic anxieties, Leth places less emphasis on the

final word "himself" in such a way that softens the critique: "Jørgen gets the rush of Sartre and Hemmingway's historical wings to wave away the discomfort and that damned insecurity because he hasn't the guts to take wing for him*self*" (my emphasis). Adamant that the criticism be expressed clearly, von Trier immediately demands a correction that evokes visible discomfort on Leth's part.

An abrupt shift of tone marks the second part of the letter, where 'Leth' first begins to express sarcasm, then self-doubt regarding his supposed victory over von Trier. This section of the letter, or one could say the entire letter itself, works in a contrapuntal manner: first, there is the triumphant 'Leth' announcing his steadfast grip over his creative methodology, proclaiming that von Trier's "pedagogical mission" has failed to change him, as it were, and that the obstructions have only enabled him to "[grow] more sure of [him]self." Second, the voiceover reading the letter is accompanied by an artful, black and white cinematic portrait of Leth that speaks illustratively and contradicts the text uttered by the voiceover. While there is a sense of the voiceover providing access to the interiority of the auteur, it is still, after all, Leth's performance of a fictionalised version of himself. The 'real human' that one sees on the screen is a Leth who is hesitant, confused, and uncertain. Indeed, von Trier highlights in the letter Leth's bouts of depression before the start of the project. On the one hand, von Trier's selection of the more unflattering shots of Leth for this remake expresses a meta-discursive affirmation of the *cinéma-vérité* commitment he bears to the project. This is, after all, a documentary about Leth and art. On the other hand, the visual temper of the fifth remake — one of provocation and frustration — underlines Leth's involvement in

The Five Obstructions as von Trier's example to illustrate the importance of error, lack of control, and the unintentional in service of expressing authenticity. Perhaps the most telling moment is the very last line of the letter where 'Leth' reads: "And you fell flat on your face. How does the perfect human fall? This is how the perfect human falls." As this line is uttered, we see Leth in his hotel room in Brussels, falling to the floor, mimicking the same movement in the original film. The entire film ends with the close of the letter, where no further discussion or comment is made on this final remake.

The irony in the final remake is telling: as von Trier extols the virtues of imperfection through the project, it is significant that the last remake by him articulates the crux of *The Five Obstructions* in a manner that is at once carefully constructed and closely focused on the imperfections of its subject matter, Leth. This is von Trier's remake of *The Perfect Human* with its 'imperfect' director now as the subject. As von Trier previously mentioned in the documentary, he finds it much more valuable when one's weaknesses are exposed:

> The greatest gift an actor can give you is to screw up. … [w]hen he does a scene he hates, but which is great for me because it came as if through the machine that the actor is in that situation, and in which he has done the good stuff, too.

In essence, von Trier's final subjugation of Leth, as it were, sees Leth now defamiliarised and turned into the subject that is being studied, and more importantly, this last work gives Leth absolutely no scope for expression or invention. The fact remains, though, that the footage of Leth at work is unrehearsed, unstudied, yet these are ultimately scenes and actions prompted by

von Trier's parameters of the challenges. One has the sense that this is Leth laid bare, a 'perfect' director documented by von Trier, in a similar style to *The Perfect Human*. Apart from authoring the letter for Leth's voiceover, the footage was not even selected by von Trier himself, but rather an assistant. Could this, then, be von Trier's homage to Leth using Leth's own techniques and methodology, including using Leth himself? If this is so, then who is the creator of the documentary? Whether Leth was victorious or if he "screwed up" is not quite the point of the entire text. Instead, the documentary is concerned with perhaps a more esoteric question regarding the nature of art and authorship. Bainbridge writes that the act of having Leth narrate the letter illustrates "the problem of where control actually lies in this process of exchange between the two filmmakers and foregrounding questions about where the authentic film lies" (159). Since von Trier asserts that foregoing one's control over the narrative can lead to the expression of authenticity in cinematic art, perhaps this notion paradoxically applies to the entire documentary where his arbitrary manipulation of the challenges and its main actor, Leth, has indeed created a space in which an original and candid examination of the process of art-making has taken place, especially in the form of Obstruction #5.

In a postmodern context, the question of where authority lies in the creation of a text highlights the difficulty with which a single authorial voice can be identified; *The Five Obstructions* problematises this through the fact that this film contains two directors, both working on the same project of reinvention: Leth is tasked with producing remakes and von Trier is simultaneously utilising the entire enterprise as a visual record of how he reinvents or revives an auteur's aesthetic

motivations, and especially to reveal moments of expressive authenticity in Leth's work. However, from a larger perspective, the film is driven by von Trier's experiment of reinstating an auteur who was previously stuck in inactivity due to a certain weariness of his own aesthetic methodology, and this is what gives the film a modernist thrust. If modernism suggests a rejection of convention and tradition in order to create new and radical works, then the metanarrative of the film certainly reflects this enterprise. In other words, Leth's process of self-scrutiny and self-examination emerges as a narrative strand under von Trier's direction. In this sense, then, one can then argue that von Trier's is indeed the dominant authorial voice, and is one that self-consciously asserts a reverence for the auteur's control over the narrative.

Chapter 3: *The Boss of It All* - Performing Authenticity

The release of the film in 2006 was heralded by von Trier's "Statement of Revitality" that spoke of his desire for a "narrowing down" of his work process and to proceed with an even more ascetic mode of cinema than his previous films. "In the last few years I have felt increasingly burdened by barren habits and expectations — my own and other people's — and I feel the urge to tidy up," he declared. In many ways, the statement reflects the tenets of Dogme 95. As the aim of Dogme 95 was to offer filmmakers a pared-down approach to filmmaking, so does von Trier's very personal proclamation demand a further scaling down by limiting himself to a smaller budget, a smaller production crew, and even premièring the film only at the Copenhagen Film Festival instead of Cannes. As a demonstration of the level of abstention in the filming of *The Boss of It All*, von Trier introduces the Automavision process and principle, where various cinematographic elements are programmed into a computer that decides the movements of the film camera autonomously, *sans* director or cinematographer.

The film is the first post-Dogme venture by von Trier that is closer to the spirit of the manifesto, in a similarly ironic and self-reflexive manner. A central idea is that even though the film may not have followed all the Dogme rules, von Trier has certainly foregrounded its principles of self-denial in the production of the film, and thus marks the film as a treatise about losing control to find a certain pleasure and truth in filmmaking. Yet, when one notes that the film is packaged as

a comedy – and this is where the self-reflexive irony is hinted at – such a combination of elements suggests that one is not to take von Trier's pronouncements too seriously, and that a certain ambiguity regarding its aesthetic is present. Within this film, von Trier's framework of further ascetism is an interesting variation on the ideas of auteurship, control, and authenticity.

As mentioned earlier, each of his early films problematises the notion of control as he increasingly relinquishes his control over the filmmaking process through various means. Where *The Five Obstructions* was a preliminary exercise in the director losing control over the conceptual aesthetic to serendipitously reveal a more 'human' and authentic expression, *Boss* is an exercise in deliberately stripping the director of control over the technology itself, intentionally engendering and consciously performing a mode of expressive authenticity. This chapter will first discuss von Trier's manipulation of technology with the Automavision idea, then move on to his exploration of the motifs of control and authenticity in the narrative of this film. The chapter will end with an interrogation of how this variation on losing control feeds into the architecture of the auteur.

The chief notion here is that *Boss* is a thoroughly ironic film that acts as meta-textual comment on von Trier's personal approach to filmmaking and his canon, and does so through a high degree of self-reflexivity. The word 'personal' is key in this argument, because the suggestion is that the film is a reflection of the public figure of Lars von Trier, the self-professed 'control freak.' Where *The Five Obstructions* discussed a broader theme of cinematic authorship, von Trier now

turns the focus inward to examine his own agency as an auteur filmmaker, with the intention of showcasing a critical meditation on control and the authenticity of the self's involvement in the production of original art. In spite of von Trier's pronouncements of renouncing directorial control, the film emphatically foregrounds the converse, where the argument follows: that the auteur is by all counts responsible for the artistic ideology of the film, and that the auteur, being in control of his aesthetic, must ensure that the drive for innovation and originality is ever present in order to maintain his stature as an artist. The film can thus be read as von Trier's project of understanding the ways by which the performance of auteurship is at once both an artifice but also a necessary presence for the legitimacy of the art and its practice. The question is not whether the auteur is in control of his art, but rather, whether this very public discussion of his own methodology helps him to attain a sense of legitimacy with his artistic identity as a filmmaker and, aptly, as The Boss of It All.

Blurring It All

The film can be characterised as an office comedy not unlike the popular BBC pseudo-documentary and comedy, *The Office* (2001-03). The director of a small Danish IT company, Ravn (Peter Gantzler), hires a stage actor, Kristoffer (Jens Albinus), to play the part of the long-absent boss, Svend, a figure he previously invented in order to obfuscate his own role in any unpopular decisions within the company. An important negotiation with a potential Icelandic investor is about to take place, and he has stated that he will not negotiate with anyone other than the

director. This is where Kristoffer comes in to temporarily fill the role of the boss at this meeting, all the while directed by Ravn, who remains behind his mask as a mere employee. The other employees chance upon 'Svend' by accident, and this leads to a series of farcical situations where Kristoffer becomes embroiled in various relationships in the office, but cannot unmask himself under the terms of his contract with Ravn. Danish office life is the primary setting of the comedy, and the humour is concentrated on Kristoffer's perplexity of being lost and entangled in workplace politics.

Von Trier chose to allow the computer almost full control over the filming process — this means that there is no cinematographer, but instead, a computer. The process includes von Trier setting up the camera at an arbitrary spot, then programming the computer to pan, tilt, or zoom in a randomised manner, all ultimately "developed with the intention of limiting human influence," he says. Automavision reflects what some critics call the 'perversity' of von Trier's method, where a measure of self-denial (sometimes framed as self-flagellation) is always present. In this case, a film is made without a cameraman and the director has no control over the camera's movements, as it were (Macnab "I'm a Control Freak"). The "imprecise image" that is produced might be viewed as an extension of the Dogme call for the unpredictable, the unrehearsed, and the authentic. An example of such a moment occurs toward the end of the film where Kristoffer is about to sign off on the contract that would sell the company off to the Icelandic tycoon. As he is in the midst of his theatrics, the camera also partially captures the expressions of the other co-workers as they look on from the periphery. While some are visibly

stifling giggles, the others are looking intently upon Kristoffer, as though completely absorbed by his performance. It is uncertain if the actors, at this point, have forgotten their roles or are still 'in character' and are laughing at Albinus's/Kristoffer's ridiculous act, or alternatively, are simply not paying attention to their performance with the knowledge that the camera's focus is on Albinus and not them. It is in this "imprecision" and confusion for the viewer that a sense of expressive authenticity in the moment is conveyed. That is to say, these unintended and accidental elements in the shot suggest the blurring between acting and being, and between fact and fiction. In a further point, this scene is highly self-reflexive, especially since Albinus's performance of Kristoffer who is in turn performing a fictitious role marks a direct reference to the ontological artificiality of the film.

Immediately, one recalls Bertolt Brecht's theatre that provokes the spectator into a sort of critical reflection to acknowledge the truth that the performance is only an artificial representation of reality. This is emphasised in the film through von Trier's voice-over and reflection in the windows at the beginning, as well as his frequent interjections throughout the film. Von Trier's aesthetic ideology follows Brecht's modernist project very closely in this respect, where the truth of the fiction is that illusion and the suspension of disbelief are a bourgeois and inauthentic enterprise. In a sense, the desire for illusion has far too much control over the performance and narrative, which leads to a contrary desire to break down this control by emphasising the fictive performativity of the film. Thus, this becomes von Trier's attempt to shake the viewer into action and intellectual involvement, thereby demonstrating a genuine fidelity to his aesthetic philosophy.

The ambiguity in the example mentioned above, of whether the actors are acting or not, is a mode of asserting the truth that the film is laid bare as fiction. By relinquishing the controlling desire to craft an illusive performance, von Trier is supporting his thesis of authenticity in the filmmaking enterprise.

To further elaborate on the idea of allowing arbitrary diegetic 'accidents' to surface on the screen, it is useful to consider a contrast. For example, the aesthetic in *Boss* is completely at odds with the fixed, immersive, and artfully composed shots from von Trier's *Europa* trilogy that is typical of most films:

> After doing *Europa* with very very fixed shots and camera movements, I was tempted to do something totally different. I started using a handheld camera and we invented a form of framing, or non-framing, called pointing of the camera, because I hate framing. … I kind of like this machine style, techno style. (Muss "Slave To Cinema")

The idea is that the extent of von Trier's cinematographic input in *Boss* involves just pointing the camera in the general direction where the actors are positioned, and then allowing the automated process to do the rest of the work. It is significant that this act of yielding control to a randomised "machine style" is seen as the next progression from the kind of relinquishing of artistic control that he experimented with his earlier films. The use of technology and randomised film capture is not new to von Trier, having pulled off a similar act with *Dancer in the Dark*'s '100 cameras' method.[9] *Riget* (*The Kingdom*, 1994) was also an instance of von Trier abandoning the conventional mode, and instead applying uncomfortable rules that

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[9] For the musical sequences, von Trier set up one hundred digital cameras fixed at different positions and angles in the specific location to record the actors simultaneously. He would then piece together the footage in an arbitrary manner and retaining the rapid, jarring changes in perspective.

would see him label the filming as "left-handwork" (Schepelern "Interview"). Similarly, *The Five Obstructions* features von Trier ceding artistic control to another director (in that case, an actor or agent in the narrative). Here, however, his loss of control to the Automavision process is even more pronounced, since it is a machine that determines the camera angles in an almost-autonomous manner, thus further diminishing the influence of the director.

The Boss

What does this mean for the auteur and his control over the film? Even though it might seem like the auteur has 'lost control' to technology, as represented by the handover of the cinematography to Automavision, von Trier suggests that even this gesture of letting go is itself an illusion, since the director is ultimately the only controlling figure. Already from the opening and closing of the film, the glimpses of von Trier and the fixed camera act as a direct assertion that von Trier is completely in control. To emphasise this, his voiceover clearly draws the spectator's attention to his omniscient presence: "Like you, I would like to get home, but I'd like to apologise to those who wanted more and those who wanted less." As he speaks, the camera zooms out into an establishing shot, starting from outside the room that Kristoffer is in, then continues zooming out while the camera pans across the skyline of the city. The suggestion here is that the narrative is a contained piece of fiction that is under the control of the director, who decides on the final edit of the film. Therefore, in the case of Automavision, we might

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conclude that von Trier's intent is to highlight this point: despite a tendency to fall back on formulaic and conventional techniques to fill out or replace the directorial role of creatively and spontaneously framing the shots, the director's imperative as the creator and originator of the film can never be expunged. In the earlier example where Kristoffer signs the contract, one might envision the conventional technique of focusing the camera squarely on him, coupled with several shot/reverse shots to position his co-workers within the scene logically. Instead, what we see is an almost incoherent series of jump cuts filmed by Automavision that reveal unkempt peripheral elements that might ordinarily be ignored or cut out of the frame, yet whose presence indicates the director's deliberate choice to leave them in. One can extrapolate from this commitment to truth and authenticity in the 'accident' in cinema, that the director's agency is highlighted.

Consequently, von Trier's foregrounding of Automavision is a playful comment on the heightened role of technology in contemporary mainstream cinema, where the director has become slave to the technology. Special effects or automated film machinery and the like are a means to propel the story forward. In light of big-budget effects-laden fare, it is clearly a case of the director being subservient to illusory cinematic technology, moulding the plot and aesthetic to suit the limitations or possibilities of the technology. It is usually the case where the more detailed the special effects, the lesser the focus on plot development and such essential elements of storytelling on film. This is precisely the kind of aesthetic artificiality that von Trier finds abominable, and it is the mode of

hackneyed filmmaking that he seeks to lessen, diminish, and more importantly, to react against to 'revitalise' the medium.

The open-endedness of Automavision's technical possibility allows chance to 'decide' and automatism to be foregrounded in his cinema. Keeping in mind von Trier's larger humanist commitment to foreground the auteur, the use of Automavision and the disregard of conventional cinematic techniques act in a paradoxical manner to reclaim the element of expressive creativity and authenticity through the use of technology. Stanley Cavell writes: "in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one's work is assured of a place in that tradition" (104). The "automatisms" here refer to the cinematic conventions that are typically employed in mainstream filmmaking. Cavell's quote suggests that the mastery of such techniques and conventions confirms the director's induction into the auteur league, as it were. Yet, von Trier achieves the same goal through his *oeuvre* by subverting the conditions – that is, letting go of the dominating impulse to adhere to conventions. In doing so, he takes pride in being the modernist vanguard that questions and interrogates cinematic convention to consider the possibilities of cinema. Through this film, one can consequently interpret this layer as an additional bid for von Trier to cement the exploration and critical discussion of technology and control as a hallmark of his aesthetic.

The Camera

Automavision, with its 'imprecision' and lack of directorial control, serves the purpose of revealing the authentic, especially when one considers the motif of 'defocusing' established in *The Five Obstructions*. That is, for the director to step back and allow the computer to simply record, is to relinquish his immediate control over the image. In a similar way, the actors have no control over the scope of their performance: since they do not know how the camera might move, they would not be able to intentionally perform *to* the camera, but instead concentrate on performing the role, and even extemporise to a certain degree.[10] These gestures point to an acknowledgement of the Dogme-like rhetoric that is indebted to *cinéma vérité*. Referring to the actor's relationship with the camera, Peter Schepelern writes that the hand-held camera denotes "a character's intense sense of self (subjective camera)" (qtd. in Lessard 107). That is, this heightened sense of self that is thus represented is embodied by the unfixed camera's claim to authenticity and originality.

Here, consider the scenes where the Icelandic tycoon, Finnur (played by Icelandic filmmaker Friðrik Þór Friðriksson), and his interpreter, Tolk (Benedikt Erlingsson), arrive in the office to attempt to finalise the deal. Finnur relies on his

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[10] Von Trier originally wanted to take this a step further by hiding the camera behind a double mirror, but eventually had to abandon the idea due to the lack of light involved (Macnab, "'I'm a Control Freak").

interpreter to rapidly translate what the Danes are saying, and always ends up confused and frustrated at Kristoffer's and Ravn's lack of resolution regarding their contract. His confusion, as caught on the film, gives one the sense that his inability to understand Danish is genuine. What is more interesting is the unending translation uttered by Tolk throughout the lengthy scenes where Kristoffer lapses into self-serving soliloquies in front of his audience. While the focus is again on Kristoffer, we hear Tolk's stream of Icelandic translations as a kind of contrapuntal voice that detracts our attention from Kristoffer's theatrics. Furthermore, the camera captures his steady whispering in Finnur's ear every so often in such scenes. Similarly, Jean Marc Barr, a French-American actor, plays one of the employees who is not Danish and who does not speak Danish at all. As he sits in on the group sessions, he is again in the peripheral vision of the camera, and his expressions of curiosity at the events unfolding indeed have the quality of being unrehearsed. Taken together, the three peripheral characters might be understood as a conduit through which von Trier manifests the idea of blurring the distinction between acting and performing, where the latter suggests a deeper degree of 'being' the character. The incessant jump cuts and even in the other scenes where von Trier interrupts the narrative, the camera's wandering movement, particularly in the closing scene, suggests an unfettered liberty and objectivity that the camera is endowed with. Therefore, I posit that the element of authenticity is made possible by von Trier's autonomous camera, as its uncontrolled and random order of movements that capture the actors' performances from various perspectives similarly reflects the disembodied will to express the ethos of realism and thus authenticity through an abdication of aesthetic responsibility.

Narrative Struggles

Furthermore, this dilemma of control and authenticity is discussed thematically within the narrative of the film. It is reflected succinctly at the start, where one is already drawn to the artificiality of the film and its 'new' methodology with von Trier's voice-over and reflection in the glass windows, standing behind his camera positioned on a moving crane, as if to remind the viewer that he is still the boss in charge — a sort of god-like figure controlling and manipulating the fate of the characters. At three other points in the film, von Trier interrupts the narrative, commenting on the comedy from a distanced perspective marked by a zoom-out. For instance, after Kristoffer seems to have gotten himself into the worst misunderstanding with the employees thus far, the image switches to an exterior shot, and again we are reminded of von Trier's presence as he speaks:

> Oh, no! Just as things were working out. Why this break? Not to mention this primitive, pointless ZOOM? I declare, no comedy without breaks. Vitamins must be injected, however reluctant we are. And who likes being the doctor with his syringe, interrupting a child's play? You're right. Yours truly.

This extra-diegetic comment immediately emphasises two points about the film: first, that this is a narrative that is centred on the struggle between control over one's self and being controlled by another agent. Not only does Kristoffer suffer the same problem as he struggles to negotiate the control that Ravn has over him (via their non-disclosure agreement), he also seeks to find avenues and loopholes through which he might subvert Ravn's power over him. Second, on an extra-

diegetic level, von Trier's interruptions of the narrative coupled with the unabating

jump cuts work to 'jolt' the viewer, thus creating a sort of Brechtian distancing that

highlights not only the artificiality of the medium, but also insists that the viewer

be reminded that the auteur/von Trier remains the architect of the project. In the

publicity of the film, the most intriguing aspect related to this discussion is the

Lookey challenge that will be explained later. In both instances, the nature of

game-play is of significance, especially concerning artistic innovation and identity.

This will be explored further at the end of this chapter. Ultimately, von Trier's

physical presence in the picture suggests the sense that the notion of control is

certainly an anxiety of his that becomes the means of attaining a sense of stability

and authentic meaning in his work. In an interview, he remarks:

> When I'm doing something I know I can do — it might be one of several
> things, filmmaking, for instance — I don't feel frightened. There I'm in
> control. … I'm scared of things I can't control. But I don't feel the slightest
> bit anxious about things I know I can control. (Björkman *Trier on Von Trier*
> 185-6)

To illustrate the first point about control and selfhood, a clearer elaboration

of the narrative plot is necessary: a key focus of the film is on the struggle between

Ravn and Kristoffer for control over their situation. Their relationship is thus: Ravn

is secretly planning to cash in by selling the company and its flagship software

product called 'Brooker 5' to the Icelandic tycoon without telling any of the

employees and its six co-founders. Kristoffer, standing-in for the fictitious boss

that Ravn has created, discovers this scheme and attempts to delay the signing of

the multi-million-krone contract. In the meantime, in his encounters with the

employees, Kristoffer discovers that Ravn had previously, without telling him,

constructed a number of personae for the boss, where each employee has a different version in mind. Kristoffer finds himself having to navigate these different facets of the same identity with each co-worker with great difficulty, yet towards the end of the film, he comes to an enlightened understanding of the role he is playing in the office, and thus helps to repair relationships between the employees. While he is unable to reveal that his identity as the 'boss of it all' is a farce since he has signed an agreement with Ravn, "a whiz at contracts," he manages to force Ravn to confess his scheme to his employees through a similar contract. However, the two continue to undercut each other and gain the upper-hand by exploiting loopholes in their contracts, up to the point where a comedic struggle emerges. Ravn is finally compelled to reveal that he had been the 'boss of it all' all along, and that Kristoffer was his hired actor. Instead of facing his co-workers' fury, his expression of guilt and sorrow is so convincing that the other employees forgive him unequivocally, and with the renewed sense of camaraderie, Ravn decides not to sell the company. At this, Kristoffer is stunned as he has now been forgotten and his status as the victim and whistle-blower, as it were, is ignored. In a pathetic attempt to refocus the attention on him, since he cannot bear that Ravn now has all the attention, Kristoffer insists emphatically that he still holds the power of attorney to sell the firm based on Ravn's initial contract with him, and threatens to do so. After some coaxing to soothe his ego, and indirectly forcing everyone to witness his performance and acknowledge his prowess as an actor, he relents and announces that he will not sell the company. Yet, after an absurd coincidence that sees the Icelandic tycoon mention Gambini favourably, a (fictional) playwright whom Kristoffer reveres, he ends up signing the contract to

sell the company off anyway, ending the film on an absurdist, anticlimactic, and yet humorous note.

The delicate dance of power between Ravn and Kristoffer highlights the peculiar motif of control over one's identity. If one were to map Kristoffer's character onto von Trier's persona, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the former's actorliness is nothing foreign to the director's fondness for a very public construction of his persona. In a similar way, also, the manner in which Kristoffer artfully manages his multiplicity of identities might also be seen as von Trier's manipulation of his creative identities, especially in the context of the critical media. Foucault writes about the "technology of the self" in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, describing how an image of one's self-identity is tempered by the engagement with externalised versions of one's self (Bainbridge 164). How the self is engineered depends, therefore, on an understanding and, in von Trier's case, manipulation of these multiple versions.

The idea of manipulation and consolidating control is interesting here, since it is opposed to what von Trier ostensibly proposes. In essence, his formulation is as follows: the artistic identity of Lars von Trier is constructed through losing control over his aesthetics which allows him to reinvent new modes of working. The paradox, however, is that even with the relinquishing of control over the filming, he regains that control through other means — through the final editing, the manuscript — all with the aim of ensuring the visibility of his auteurship. Whether he is described by the press as '*enfant terrible*,' '*agent provocateur*,'

'control freak,' or 'manic depressive,' there is never any doubt that the architecture of his identity is clearly that of an auteur, and is something that he asserts emphatically. Even the stipulation in the Statement of Revitalisation that, "with regard to PR, [his] intention is for a heavy reduction in quantity, compensated for by more thorough exploration in the quality press," it is unambiguous that the pronouncement is aimed at distinguishing the kind of attention that his work should be getting, and generating critical publicity for the film. Most of all, the specificity of his auteur standing is foregrounded. In the film, Kristoffer comes to the realisation that to triumph over Ravn's clever avoidance of revealing the truth, he must stop resisting Ravn's tricks and give in to his adopted character as the boss, Svend. In other words, he must relinquish his real self and embrace the Svend personality. Only then can he reclaim his 'true' identity as an actor and thus consolidate his power over Ravn by manipulating the various versions of Svend created by Ravn, and also manipulate the other employees to turn them against Ravn. The motif of losing control, in this case, can be interpreted as a way to regain another mode of power that allows one to reinterpret the situation. The motif then becomes a marker of von Trier's purposeful construction of his artistic identity as an auteur.

Pursuant to this end, the second point about von Trier's extra-diegetic involvement provides another layer of complexity to his auteurship and his commitment to authenticity. Here, the idea of the game is significant, and works in a similar way to *The Five Obstructions*. The 'Lookey' concept was introduced in

tandem with the film, and a prize of 30,000 Kroner was offered to the first Danish viewer to solve the game:

1. Lookey is a mind game, played with movies as a game board.
2. A "Lookey" is a visual element out of context that is added to a movie.
3. A feature film includes between five and seven Lookeys.
4. All Lookeys in a movie can be decoded by a system that is unique for the movie. To decipher the system is part of the challenge.
5. The superior observer is awarded.
       (LOOKEY website, http://www.lookey.dk.)

According to von Trier, the Lookey challenge was meant as a way to "keep viewers alert and active" because film's biggest shortcoming is that it is "a one-way medium with a passive audience" (qtd. in Mitchell). One such Lookey takes place in Kristoffer and Ravn's argument in the zoo. The sequence is composed of various shots from different perspectives, and one notices that the same scene was shot in different locations as the backdrop alternates between an open space and another location full of hedges. The point here is that this is a game of 'spot the difference' and is an attempt at engaging the viewer. Integrating a game into the diegesis of the film certainly adds yet another dimension of playfulness, and along with Automavision and its visual dissonance, creates a counteraction to the usual 'suspension of disbelief' for film-viewing. While watching the drama unfold, the viewer is also distracted into directing his attention to extra-narrative elements. Like his earlier experiments with Brechtian drama in *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, the dramatisation of such distancing techniques serves von Trier's larger objective of reinvigorating the experience of cinema by explicitly foregrounding and negotiating its artificiality. The intended result is a meaningful exercise in fostering an authenticity of the film-watching experience for the audience, whose subjectivity is not directly controlled and manipulated by mainstream conventions,

as it were. While the aim of Dogme is to initiate the same 'authentic' experience for filmmakers, this time the focus is specifically shared with viewers. Here, Mirja Julia Minjares notes that von Trier explicitly reveals the 'trickery' of the film to its audience, and so in that sense might be understood as a further development of the Dogme manifesto. Von Trier expects the viewer to negotiate with the challenges and distractions he presents in the film, so as to better appreciate the specificities of the medium. As Kristoffer's ex-wife Kisser says towards the end of the film, "Life is a dogma film. It's hard to hear, but the words are still important."

By framing the narrative of *Boss* within a self-referential debate about the nature of authenticity and auteurship, von Trier has indeed illustrated the ironies and contradictions that are the badge of the von Trier 'brand.' In particular, the control that he wields (and pretends to yield) is a significant element of the larger discourse surrounding his calculated self-construction as an auteur. The overt show of playfulness and negotiation of subjectivities highlight the point that his is a cinema of ideas, especially ideas that one only arrives at after being grossly manipulated by the contrary theatrics of the film. Ravn, acting here as an analogue of von Trier, declares aptly at one point in the film: "The idea is God... Even if Hitler was the writer." In his next major project, *Antichrist*, von Trier explores this theme of control at a much deeper and personal level, and, as befits his contrary nature, completely reworks the ideas of his Statement of Revitalisation to reflect a film that, at least on the surface, can be seen as a total about-turn of *The Boss of It All*.

Chapter 4: *Antichrist* - "It is too beautiful."

After a crippling illness that left him incapacitated for six months in 2007, von Trier set about to work on his latest project, a horror film. Premièring at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2009, *Antichrist* was screened to an audience that expressed their outrage in very similar ways to the first audiences of *Idioterne* and *Dancer in the Dark* — with plenty of boos, hisses, people storming out of the auditorium, and prolonged media furore. Despite the hailstorm of negative criticism surrounding the horror film, Charlotte Gainsbourg left the festival with the *Prix d'interprétation féminine* (Prize for Best Actress) for her role in the film. This time around, there was no manifesto, no Statement of Revitality, nor any overt provocation of cinematic form. The only ruffle, as it were, came from the shock value of the film's objectionable content. Yet, despite being a horror film, it is not very far from the self-reflexive temper of his last project which was a comedy. Knud Romer notes, like so many other remarkable auteurs, von Trier "keeps making the same film over and over again in different, increasingly radical variations." In acknowledgement of this pattern, von Trier remarks that the idea of the 'genre film' is an inspiration and motivation for his desire for aesthetic innovation: "I'll probably never really hit any genre straight on, because I think you should add something to them" (qtd. in Romer). On that account, the underlying connection between *Antichrist* and the other 'genre films' that von Trier has produced (*Dancer in the Dark* - a musical, *Breaking the Waves* - a melodrama), is that they are specimens by which he not only exhibits his mastery of storytelling, but also where he manipulates the aesthetic forms to explore metaphysical questions about truth

and authentic expressions of emotion and spectatorship. The latter consideration is the "something" that he adds to the horror genre which is of import to this analysis, especially since, in the context of his months-long depression and personal anxieties about control, von Trier has emphatically revealed to the press that *Antichrist* is a deeply personal film. Therefore, *Antichrist*'s innovative appeal is perhaps not as perspicuous and explicitly delimited as the experiments in form and technique that von Trier's earlier films boast. There is not as much direct rhetoric that surrounds the film as the manifestos and statements that came before, and no clear guiding aesthetic framework shapes the film. Instead, *Antichrist* is a rich visual text packed with symbolic imagery and a sophisticated style that seems to reflect von Trier's technical prowess with film. Significantly, the themes of control and authenticity as composed in this film have their genesis in a different circumstance that originated from von Trier's personal life at the time of the film's making.

A key line from the film signals this proposition: "Chaos reigns." In this chapter, the first argument occurs on the level of the narrative, where we see the idea of expressive authenticity conveyed through the motif of chaos filling the gap created by a lack of control. The couple's conventional social roles as parents have disintegrated with their child's death. With their move into the woods, their chaotic and true natures are thereby coaxed to the fore to fill this gap in self-identity and meaning. The second argument posited in this chapter is that the incidental collaborative action from the near-absence of von Trier's artistic control results in a film that projects the authenticity of the creative dynamic between the various

agents: actors, director of photography, and director. That is, von Trier giving up a measure of his directorial control due to his illness has allowed other creative agents to fill that absence. I will first examine the film's treatment of chaos and control as a subject within the narrative, then explore how, despite von Trier's seemingly minimal involvement, this subject manifests itself in the production and performance of the film. Lastly, the collaborative nature of *Antichrist* calls to question the idea of the auteurist film as the artistic expression of a sole individual, where von Trier foregrounds the tension between performance and practice in the construction of his auteur identity. He does so through his publicity of the film as a carefully packaged product, and this will be evaluated alongside the implications of von Trier's gambit in releasing such a provocative film to public outcry.

Chaos Reigns

Antichrist tells the story of a couple — nameless except as 'He' (Willem Dafoe) and 'She' (Gainsbourg) — who deal with the trauma from the accidental death of their infant son by retreating to a cabin in the woods, named Eden. He, a psychiatrist by profession, attempts to treat his wife by himself, hoping to cure her insuperable depression without the use of prescribed drugs but instead through rhetoric and cognitive therapy. His methods focus on taking her through visualisations of her fear, which reveal her perception that the woods and herself are evil personified. We learn that she had previously stayed in the same cabin with their son while working on her doctoral thesis about gynocide (femicide) in history, and there is the faint suggestion that she had attempted to harm the child

then. Meanwhile, She struggles against her husband's rationalist attempts by interrupting their therapy sessions with sex, while He is confounded by the portentous signs that he stumbles upon in the cabin and in the woods. The difficult road to recovery turns to insanity and horror, resulting in graphic scenes of physical disfigurement and torture. Their move to Eden thus becomes a sharp descent into Hell, as She becomes even more convinced by the idea that women are evil, just as Nature is, and starts to embody this notion by committing a series of heinous acts that are focused on dismantling her husband's rational subjectivity. She physically attacks him in rages of fury, and goes as far as attempting near-castration, attaching a grindstone to a bolt drilled through his leg, and performing genital self-mutilation with a pair of rusty scissors. Von Trier does not spare the viewer in this last section, depicting these scenes with significant visual detail, before ending the film with He strangling She and making his way out of the woods. The film is divided into four chapters sandwiched by a Prologue and Epilogue filmed in black and white. The chapters are respectively titled Grief, Pain (Chaos Reigns), Despair (Gynocide), and The Three Beggars. The latter refers to the three animals that symbolise a trinity of death: a deer (Grief), fox (Pain), and crow (Despair), and, according to She, the simultaneous appearance of all three signals death. At various points, they individually appear before He, and are seen together only at the end of the film while he makes his escape.

Jan Simons tracks a pattern in characterisation evident in all of von Trier's films:

> The protagonist in each of his films enters a world in which he or she is a stranger and where he or she is confronted with the task of finding out what laws, rules, customs, and conventions govern the behaviour of its inhabitants. (188)

This trait is seen very clearly in the characters of Beth (*Breaking the Waves*), Karen (*Idioterne*), Selma (*Dancer in the Dark*), Grace (*Dogville*), Kristoffer, and to an extent, Jørgen Leth as well. Already, it is unambiguous that such a set-up reflects that of a game, since, once the character learns and masters those rules and customs, he or she is able to manipulate and subvert them to his/her benefit to effect a release or catharsis of sorts. In *Antichrist*, this role of the protagonist is precariously split between the two characters, and the film is centred on the psychological struggle between them as they search for ways and means to resolve their emotional and psychological predicament. I suggest that the subject of control is analysed, subverted, and radically weakened with wild abandon — the film is in favour of the argument for the deficiencies of any kind of rationalist structure in our lived experience.

The terms of the struggle are clear, and the characters are unambiguously aligned to a specific dichotomy depicting control and chaos. He, representing the rational and the clinical, stubbornly insists that his scientific methods can cure his wife's trauma and depression, who in this case might represent the irrational and emotional figure that resists being categorised or diagnosed. In a theological context, She is portrayed as the figure of Eve, who in the Christian tradition is represented as the personification of evil and bringer of death (Beattie). Significantly, their move to the cabin in the forest, which She says is the place she

fears the most, is charged through with symbolic references: as they make their way deeper into the primeval woods, they cross a bridge that symbolises the partition that separates culture and nature, reason and chaos, and sanity and madness (Beattie). In a romantic sense, the forest also signifies illogic and the fear of the unknown, and von Trier highlights this emphatically with the expressionist visual design of the space. The psychiatrist, on the one hand, directs his wife through the ordeal of coming to terms with their son's death by his impersonal and dispassionate analyses, thereby asserting his power of reason and knowledge over her emotional and psychological infirmity. Yet, on the other hand, for all his rationalist scientific certainty, he is unable to identify the real source of her fear. Even though She arrives at the location not able to even walk on the grass due to her neurosis, she later tames her fear and embraces the primacy of the woods. At this point, her comment "Nature is Satan's church" becomes much more resonant as She becomes the dominant figure in the later half of the film, rising to become the antichrist, as it were. Appropriately, the speaking fox also utters "Chaos reigns" to the hapless psychiatrist in the woods. Even though He manages to kill her at the end, we are shown in the Epilogue an overwhelming mass of women coming out of the woods, engulfing him as he stares grimly into the sea of bodies.

Such a characterisation is an archetypal division of the sexes, indeed, where female sexuality is painted as dark and monstrous as the sprawling woods. Nature is portrayed as chaotic and abstruse in the film. Von Trier explains his choice of a forest setting:

> What characterises this virgin territory is maximal death: a great quantity of species fighting for life there, fighting for light, fighting for survival. Nature is filled with suffering and pain and death. …
>
> Nature goes against everything religion talks about. Nature reminds us of inescapable death and does not offer any consolation about any possibility beyond. There is nothing godlike in nature. Nature seems more to be an idea of Satan. (qtd. in Björkman, "Making the Waves" 18)

As with von Trier's other films, such references are never unintentional, and they ultimately point to a larger discourse about the nature of good and evil which is pertinent to the theological framework that the characters fit into. While her qualities directly align her character with this conception of nature, evil, and chaos, Gainsbourg's character is not meant to be read as a target of misogyny, and von Trier takes care to subvert such a reading. Instead, the eventual triumph of the feminine figure, as signified by the mass of women at the end, is yoked to the dark fascination of fear and irrationality, which, to von Trier, is more compelling than the masculine perspective of the Christian discourse of salvation where female sacrifice is necessary to bring redemption to humanity. Von Trier notes also that it is the horror and fear of the feminine form that drives the film: "I don't think women or their sexuality is evil, but it is frightening. … Certain images and certain concepts are interesting to combine in different ways. They show pieces of the human soul and human actions. That's interesting" (qtd. in Romer). In other words, the focus of the narrative hinges on the argument that chaos does indeed reign in a world where secular power structures are unable to enforce their authority.

On a related note, a short acknowledgement of the notion of abjection might further illuminate the imbalance in power between chaos and reason, and further link chaos to von Trier's articulation of authenticity. Aristotelian tragedy

has been formulated as a form of contamination (*miasma*) which is balanced in the end through ritual cleansing (*catharsis*). In this formulation, contamination leads to imbalance and chaos, which is then cleansed and purified in order to restore a certain balance and order to the social world (Sjöholm 96). In *Antichrist*, however, there is no cleansing nor purification to speak of, since She is contaminated by the ontological 'evil' of her womanhood, and She in turn contaminates Nature. Eden and its environs, including He in it, become the totality of the abject. Kristeva describes abjection as a state of being cast outside of the symbolic order of reason and society, of which it was once a subject, and argues further that the presence of the abject is "a confirmation of the fact that the subject can only be conceived of as a heterogeneous construction that is always already contaminated" (Sjöholm 97). In such terms, She embodies the full ambiguity of evil, and since abjection is the "in-between, not respecting borders, positions and rules," this also explains the inability of both He and She to identify and categorise her fear and psychosis. Throughout the film, She is projected as the embodiment of the abject that is violently positioned outside of the cultural world without a clear sense of selfhood, and it is significant that the film's grim ending sees a symbolic eclipse of women forcing her husband out of the woods. This particular moment's significance lies in the fact that it is a reversal of the idea of expulsion: it is the expulsion of not the abject, but rather, the subject who had tried to purge the contamination within the abject. It is interesting, therefore, that von Trier's perversion of Aristotelian catharsis *does* come to an uneasy balance and order, but only with chaos and the uncanny with the upper hand. Furthermore, if the abject represents the inherent, authentic nature of humans previously subdued or masked by rational convention,

then the image of a mass of women emerging from the woods and engulfing He might similarly symbolise a reemergence of the authentic.

In a more personal context for von Trier, the formulation of chaos here is perhaps an expression of his partiality to what one might conceive as the authentic and 'human' aspect of art-making, echoed from *The Five Obstructions* and the romanticised notion of 'spassing' from *Idioterne*.[11] That is to say, the imperfect artist, unrestrained and working against convention and habit, has the advantage of being able to make meaningful and genuine discoveries, either by accident, instinct, or through experimentation. The 'accident' is a key term here that characterises the relationship that chaos has with the text. The motif is manifested in two further ways: first, through von Trier's methodology, and second, through the actors and their performance of the text. Instead of following his regular method of handling the camera, controlling the images while at the same time being close to the actors during the filming (as he was wont to do before), he now has to physically stand back and direct from a very different perspective.

The first expression of the motif lies in von Trier's experience in the production of the film. He had wanted to make a horror film at the completion of *The Boss of It All* in 2007, but could not do so due to his illness. He discloses that taking on the project was a kind of therapy for him to counter his severe

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[11] The lead character, Stoffer (Jens Albinus), championed the thesis that 'spassing' (behaving like an idiot, or pretending to be mentally retarded) not only challenges and confronts convention and conformity, but also offers the space and means for authentic, unrepressed emotion to be expressed. Read in the context of the Dogme framework, *Idioterne* argued for the foregrounding of imperfections in everyday experience as a kind of freedom to allow one's 'inner idiot' to be exposed, leaving room for emotion and psychological truth to germinate.

depression, and that it was critical for him to "do something straight away and something hard." He explains further:

> My experience with anxiety and therapy was unfortunately quite big, so that became very quickly the theme. The good thing about this whole process was that I was not really feeling very well, so I wasn't rewriting a lot of the time, and things were done more instinctively. I just wrote it through once, and I didn't analyse it. (qtd. in Kehr)

There is a dominant sense here that von Trier has embraced a form of easing his control over the film that is much less conceptual and abstract than his previous films. Perhaps the key to understanding the aesthetic of the film is as von Trier says — that *Antichrist* is "a film where I had to throw reason overboard a little bit" (qtd. in Romer). In another interview he says that he used to be much more "clear and mathematical" about his earlier films, but instead, *Antichrist* felt "more like a dream" (qtd. in Bourgeois). Here, he has chosen to work with a degree of primal instinct and a more organic process that produces a certain freedom for the development of the film. Björkman rules that the film works more like a stream of consciousness, a far cry from the predominance of overt rules in von Trier's earlier projects, and the latter agrees that there is "a feeling that the film has a more *accidental* character. That's what I tried to attain. I felt so miserable when making the film, I just had the strength to take one scene at a time and hope for a more haphazard result," (my emphasis, qtd. in "Making The Waves" 19). What he means by "accidental" might be better understood as 'instinctual' — that is, where his previous involvement in his films were more intellectual and abstract, his approach to creative action in *Antichrist* was based on instinct instead. The 'accidents' or incidental creative moments that arise from the filming are due to this

unintentional obstruction to von Trier's involvement in the film; he says in the same interview that he felt like "a runner who was suddenly put in a wheelchair."

Here, the motif of a relaxed direction that engenders creative imagination is made manifest. Visually, and aside from the grislier scenes, the film stands out particularly with its painterly mise-en-scène and exceptionally long takes reminiscent of the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, to whom von Trier dedicates *Antichrist*. Tarkovsky's work favoured overt spiritual interpretations and possessed an emotional and aesthetic reliance on nature — both traits are indeed mirrored in *Antichrist*. Perhaps the more illuminating note about Tarkovsky's philosophy of cinema is that in the later part of his life, he came to realise that overindulgent control over a film's genesis restricts the imagination (Totaro). Like Tarkovsky, then, von Trier's temporary physical and psychological affliction has led him to turn to a 'freer' mode of working. He says that "it was also a choice of [his] not to make the film too logical" (Schepelern "Interview with Lars Von Trier"). For example, several scenes within the film deviate from the narrative in an elliptical manner: While explicitly positioning *Antichrist* in the horror genre, the protracted shot in extreme slow-motion of She walking through the woods, or He standing outdoors in the midst of a shower of acorns in extreme slow-motion evokes a distinct aura that is incongruent to the flow of the narrative. The latter example is particularly striking as the image breaks the fourth wall by featuring He staring directly into the camera. Similarly, the lengthy academic discussions that He and She have transform the diegesis, acting as a kind of break from the action and intense visuality of the woods, drawing the film away from the more visceral

elements of horror. In this sense, one might say that the film does not conform to conventional rules of horror and narrative cinema. As a result of this diminished desire to craft a meticulously planned film, it seems as though von Trier has approached his own earlier calls for an ascetic methodology now in a different mode from the apparent self-ironic simplicity of *The Boss of It All*. Instead, the style is less determined, abstract, and rational, but now more instinctual and borne of the psychological drama from within the narrative. Therefore, one might characterise *Antichrist* as a film that expresses an expansive visual style as well as a plot that draws heavy influence from August Strindberg's discussion of the psychological relationships between men and women in his plays. He remarks that he "let this film flow to me instead of thinking up" and this is shown in the diverse, if sometimes labyrinthine mythical imagery that is expressed in the film. In other words, the images of the woods painted in a muted palette of grey and near-colourless green express not only the fear of darkness, but perhaps also suggests the internal chaos and uncertainty from which an instinctual and evocative artistry emerges.

He continues to declare that he is immensely pleased with the film's visual style: "They come out of an inspiration that's real to me. I've shown honesty in this project" (qtd. in Romer). Where "honesty" is concerned, the idea is better understood through the near-total relinquishing of control over the film's aesthetic design. *The Five Obstructions* boasted a strict framework, while *Boss*'s only restriction was framing of the Automavision. In both cases, von Trier asserted his aesthetic authority in explicit ways. Here, he compares *Antichrist* with his earlier

films as having almost no rules: "It was also a choice of mine not to make the film too logical." By not insisting on or adhering to his tendency to effect austere aesthetic rules and instead, relying on a completely spontaneous mode of filmmaking, von Trier is indeed working from inspiration — as shown in his undisguised references to other auteurs' works and the looser narrative flow. As he remarks, he gave more control away in the sense that he "did not want it to be too constructed" and "allowed pictures to come in that was strange and not kind of in the right mathematical place" (Schepelern "Interview with Lars Von Trier"). A few examples illustrate this point: He and She's discussions about Nature and Evil meander considerably throughout the film, and their speech is frequently elliptical, with large gaps left unexplored. The same elliptical quality is seen in the editing of the narrative scenes, where abrupt jump cuts interrupt what would otherwise be a single shot. Furthermore, the stylised, steadier slow-motion shots that punctuate the story appear in an arbitrary manner, as are the overt and poetic references to other artists, such as the burning cabin at the end of the film (Tarkovsky), the thematic link between women and nature (Strindberg), and the scene with the windswept birch trees (Bergman's *Virgin Spring* [1960]). Where the von Trier of old would not have admitted readily to such borrowing of themes and images from other auteurs, here he readily conveys his inspirations overtly and plainly.

Alongside this instinctive and honest filmmaking, a level of authenticity, albeit subjective, manifested itself especially in his direction of the actors. Addressing the second point regarding the actors' performances, Gainsbourg speaks about her experience working on the set with von Trier:

> At the start of the day Lars would just say, "Go on, do it," with no indications, nothing. Nobody knew what we were really supposed to do, so the first take was often quite bad, and he would say so. It was a first step, and then he would give a lot of directions and a lot of ideas. I got the impression that he was just interested in *the truth*, in *true accidents*, and just working in all sorts of directions. (my emphasis, qtd. in Kehr)

Partly motivated by his weaker constitution during the filming, this working relationship on the set of *Antichrist* distinctly embraces the value of relinquishing control as an essential measure to allow the expression of the "true accident" and 'human' to surface. That is, the actors respond instinctually to the demands of the script in their performance. Dafoe is of the same opinion: "He feels there's more truth in accident and more truth when the actors aren't controlling what they're doing, and they're either scared or confused or struggling" (qtd. in Kehr). He continues in his favourable assessment that without pre-shoot rehearsals or preparation, one starts to "get very flexible and open with impulses" (qtd. in Bourgeois). The utterly convincing and evocative performances the two actors turn in indeed earned them critical praise, perhaps also with some thanks due to their unbounded willingness to perform outrageous and to most, abhorrent scenes. According to von Trier, the filming was a significant challenge to Gainsbourg, but a liberating one: "She claimed she had a lot of hang-ups as an actress. 'I cannot cry on film,' she said. Which isn't true, as you can see in the film," (qtd. in Björkman "Making The Waves" 19). The unique liberty with which Gainsbourg and Dafoe had in von Trier's absence allowed them to explore their characters until an authentic expression was achieved. Despite the difficulties within the chaos of uncertainty and the lack of power and constraint, von Trier seems to be making the argument that those are precisely the conditions that engender a verity in

performative expression. An outstanding example is the scene where She aggressively knocks He out with a violent blow to his genitals, then proceeds on to her attempt to disfigure her own in painful, visceral detail. The strength of Gainsbourg's interpretation is manifested in the sense of complete discomfort that the viewer experiences while watching the thoroughly violent and tense scene with explicit sexual acts that stretches on for about twenty minutes. Similarly, the choking scene is just as discomforting to watch, as its length and extreme close-up gives it some verisimilitude. The sustained presentation on Gainsbourg's part in these scenes, perhaps the most unsavoury parts in the film, is for the viewer her most striking performance that blurs the line between acting and instinctually manifesting the character, in support of the thesis of authenticity in the actors' performative expressions.

Von Trier, the Antichrist Auteur

Lastly, the express absence of an aesthetic schema in *Antichrist* has resulted in a text that opens itself up to a multitude of interpretations due to the unbridled use of symbolism and von Trier's heavy hand (through his Director of Photography) in asserting visual elegance. This latter point must be acknowledged because, despite the seeming distance von Trier puts between himself and the film by highlighting his depression in various press conferences and interviews, there is always the idea that the director is consciously defending his artistic presence in the art cinema milieu. Hence, one must interpret his exceptionally public defence of the film in a more critical light, especially when his penchant for provocation is articulated emphatically in this instance.

In this film, he deviated from the hand-held film technique that dominated his more recent projects and even turned the photography of the film over to Anthony Dod Mantle, his long-time Director of Photography, because he was in no physical shape to operate the camera. Mantle says that it is nonetheless significant that despite this limitation that von Trier faced, the latter still managed to make it one of the most technically demanding films yet, in terms of visual design. For instance, it was upon von Trier's insistence that the black and white prologue was shot with a super-high-speed camera and then slowed down tremendously:

> [I]t was Lars's intention to make that contrast between the roving physicality of the rest of the film and the amazing stillness you get when you use a high speed. What you're seeing is slowed down so much that for the first time in the cinema I had the sense of watching a film in the way that I look at a painting." (qtd. in Johnston)

This must not be mistaken as an abandonment of two of the main traits that define his artistic identity — control and innovation. Contrary to that perspective, *Antichrist* is simply von Trier's complex variation of relinquishing control to showcase and parade his artistic ego. Mantle's comment compares the visual design of the film to that of a painting, and as mentioned earlier, the references are not without purpose — that is, to align his work with those of noted European auteurs and thus situate his work within that milieu. In slowing down the shot and not ascribing further action to it, the viewer's gaze is simultaneously and deliberately focused on the image to a minute degree. This not only calls attention to the technique and artistry of the camerawork, but also suggests an insistence on acknowledging this stillness as a dissolution of the boundaries between cinema and painting. Such a shot thus interrogates the nature of cinema from an ontological

perspective: as still pictures in motion. In this sense, von Trier is indeed presenting the possibilities of cinema by foregrounding what Heidegger would term the "thingness" and truth of film (94). According to Heidegger, the authentic is that which possesses "unconcealedness" in the work — so too does *Antichrist* feature this "unconcealedness" especially in the shots in extreme slow-motion described earlier. Hence, it is not that von Trier has completely surrendered artistic control over the film completely, but that, in a manner that typifies his ironist trait, he still unequivocally performs his formal mastery of cinema in spite of his frequent laments that he is physically and mentally only "functioning at sixty percent" (Kehr).

As Schepelern writes, his public image is a combination of "detached, complex artist and challenging media personality" ("The King of Dogme" 11). As he is wont, von Trier is oxymoronically a shy exhibitionist. What his highly publicised depression and the theatrics in press conferences have done really is to draw even more attention to not only *Antichrist* but also himself and his *oeuvre*. When pressed by an indignant journalist to explain why he made the film, he said, "I never have a choice. It's the hand of God. And I am the best film director in the world," (qtd. in Bourgeois). The provocative retort manages to side-step a logical explanation of the film, since he has none, while at the same time drawing the attention closer to his personality. An auteur defines his signature mark by way of the strength and originality of his work, and in von Trier's case, by his personality and the construction of his artistic ego. Such an initiative of his highlights not only the ingenuity and coherence of his *oeuvre*, but also his principal trademarks, irony

and provocation. As von Trier once noted early in his career, "a film should be like a pebble in your shoe" with the intention to unsettle, and in the case of *Antichrist*, repulse with its provocative subject matter (qtd. in Schepelern "The Making of an Auteur" 116).

Moreover, von Trier's exaggerated and tongue-in-cheek utterance at the press conference underlines another key point regarding the visual design of *Antichrist*. It is striking that von Trier's self-conscious proclamation positions himself in the pantheon of great directors and his frequent references in his interviews to renowned artists in film, theatre, and painting also serve the same function of reaffirming his auteurship. Consequently, *Antichrist* is redolent of von Trier's reverence for those great artists, and the film consciously acts as a collection of visual quotations, as if to declare his affiliation to the coterie of auteurs. The visual and technical motifs that echo Tarkovsky and artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Henri Rousseau are evident especially in the painterly, meticulously shot scenes that utilise extreme slow-motion to the point that the shots look like still pictures, as discussed earlier. The camera lingers on each of these visual references – the burning before the cabin borrowed from Tarkovsky and the intricate tangle of the trees in the woods that reference Rousseau's paintings are examples – and thus creates a tension between the autonomy of the image and its place in the overall narrative. Hence, one might argue that von Trier is lacking control in the sense that such images are allowed to exist on their own, almost divorced from the logic of the plot. That von Trier has borrowed heavily from influential artists is not an unintentional laxity, even when he complains that

the film is "too beautiful overall," and again, blames it on his poor health at that time (qtd. in Björkman "Making The Waves" 19). The complaint is certainly a self-compliment in the same instance. This comment nevertheless reflects the pattern that von Trier has experienced a mode of liberation through an obstruction of sorts: in having to renounce his proclivity for abstracted aesthetic frameworks, he has returned to a stylistically conventional mode of filmmaking that now allows him to indulge in adornments and even overt narcissism with regard to his formal mastery. In all, von Trier's citations in and outside of the film are self-consciously and carefully placed in order to evoke an alignment to the auteurist stance.

To conclude this argument, an alternative perspective might colour this egocentricity as an anxiety. Coincidentally, two directors whom he greatly revered passed away on the same day in 2007: Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman. The passing of the latter was particularly hard on von Trier as a fellow Scandinavian, and it has been suggested that *Antichrist* is von Trier's oblique response to his anxiety about the economic and cultural viability of an auteur in the context of Hollywood genre domination (Gross 40). The choice of genre might then be seen as an interesting engagement with the idea of an auteur defending his artistic individuality against the Hollywood machine. The combination of horror and, to an extent, pornography articulates not only the presence of a great deal of self-reflexive gestures (through the customary 'horror' soundtrack, tone, and subject matter), but also von Trier's alterations of the genre. The traits of horror and pornography are taken to extremities far beyond what the placid and tamer mainstream variants offer, and this is precisely what he meant about reworking

genres to "add something to them" (qtd. in Romer). Thus, by re-examining the elements of the horror genre, he is putting to play its conventional expressions by turning them completely around, or in other scenes, amplifying them beyond orthodox boundaries of taste. In doing so, he has added his artistic mark on the film and the genre at the same time, and again, such a gesture affirms his position as an auteur in the art film canon. Furthermore, the most striking impression about *Antichrist* is the looseness in the coherence of its plot and the overwhelming intensity of its visual imagery. Thus, in letting go of the impulse to create a structured and logical film, and in his instinctual and impressionistic approach to the visual design, he has achieved an expressive authenticity of examining the relationship of the art cinema to its ontological root, the image.

While the film has invited much negative criticism due to its offensive subject matter, critics still interpret the film as a remarkable piece that has managed to provoke and perturb even the most inured of spectators. The horror film is as cerebral as it is visceral, and that in itself is an outstanding quality that mainstream films lack — a quality that only an transgressive auteur such as von Trier might achieve (Ebert).

Conclusions and Further Study

This thesis had two primary aims. The first aim was to articulate the principal motif of losing control over the course of von Trier's three latest projects, and how this act of relinquishing control is succeeded by the expression of aesthetic liberation and authenticity in the film medium. Significantly, the repetition and variation of this motif are his cosmetic means that advance his search for authenticity in his praxis, where, previously, the issue of control or loss of control was reflected in the Dogme tenets as the freedom for the camera to point at what the director deems eventful. Conversely, framing implied a tendency towards perfection in carefully planning and controlling the shot. The conclusion from his Dogme work was that the freedom of pointing fostered raw realism as opposed to the polished formalism of a fixed camera. In these three films following the Dogme experiment, von Trier has extended the idea of control beyond just the framing of the camera. The possibilities, as demonstrated in the three films, allow for a wider interrogation of the idea of expressive authenticity. This formulation of authenticity in von Trier's *oeuvre* is understood as a commitment to benchmarks outlined by Dutton. Besides a genuine expression of an individual's or society's values and beliefs, manifestations of expressive authenticity reflect a "critical and independent sovereignty" over one's aesthetic choices that are not bound to a historical tradition or tendency (Dutton 266). The moments in which one rediscovers cinema's aesthetic possibilities in the way Leth, the viewers of *Boss*, and von Trier and crew in *Antichrist* have done, are the very moments of expressive authenticity that von Trier has achieved through his projects. In other

words, the authentic moment is engendered through the emphatic agency of the aforementioned subjects, that was enabled via the free space offered by von Trier's experiment in renouncing control. The production of such authenticity, however, is not without its attendant irony and paradox, as, in the engineered act of losing control of certain aesthetic elements, there is a simultaneous assertion of von Trier's authorial agency as a master puppeteer of sorts.

Of relinquishing directorial control, *The Five Obstructions* broaches the motif on the level of the narrative, where von Trier leaves his subject, Leth, to his own creative devices in the quasi-documentary. In *Boss* it was the camera and the spectator that was given free reign, and *Antichrist* demonstrated the result of von Trier's near-complete absence from the production of the film. In all three cases, each featured the lack of control in distinct areas: the subject, then technology and the spectator, and finally, production. It is perhaps most significant that each film presents a meaningful re-examination of filmmaking as a practice, and film as a medium. Cavell writes that "[when] in such a state an art explores its medium, it is exploring the conditions of its existence; it is asking exactly whether, and under what conditions, it can survive" (72). This critical reflexivity undoubtedly marks the pursuit of expressive authenticity in von Trier's creative endeavours, and serves as manifest proof of the artistic value of relinquishing control over one's practice to reinvent and rediscover the aesthetic possibilities of cinema.

The second aim sought to link this search for authenticity in his oeuvre to another theme — the establishment of the auteur as a distinct identity. As mentioned earlier, the tension between asserting and relinquishing control gives rise to a sense of the auteur's indispensable position as the central creative agent in a film's genesis. Von Trier's articulation of this tension takes on a few layers, first with the performance of giving up aesthetic authority over selected elements in the filmmaking process; second, with the larger paradox and inevitable re-establishment of his creative influence over each project; and last, with his distinct tendency for reinvention. While each filmic experiment demands a progressive level of aesthetic obstruction, his focus is always on the ways in which the auteur's visibility in tackling such challenges is maintained amidst the demand for changing styles. Thus, it is imperative that his presence in his films do not shy away from this meta-textual comment. When he is not physically represented in his films as narrative interruptions, as in *The Five Obstructions* and *Boss*, then he brandishes provocative narratives such as *Antichrist* that draw attention to his role as director and public figure. This performance of authority makes more sense than accusations of pure narcissism when placed against the broader context of the auteur-focused art cinema in the face of commercial fare. This is where von Trier's insistence on the 'human' qualities of cinema takes precedence over cosmetic or stylistic interests. While the understanding of the auteur is as one who has a distinctive and recognisable aesthetic style, von Trier seeks to change this definition of an auteur as one who embraces the capacity for change, innovation, and reinvention.

Von Trier's film art has been and will continue to be a highlight of European cinema at every juncture. Having tackled documentary, comedy, and horror, his next venture will be a "psychological disaster" called *Planet Melancholia* (expected in 2011) and it will certainly be intriguing to see how he intends to rework the 'disaster film' and science fiction genre. While his long-time business partner, Peter Aalbaek Jensen, offers the hope that the new film would be "romantic, in a Lord Byron sort of way," von Trier commented that there would be "no more happy endings!" — as though his films thus far all ended on an uplifting note (Roxborough). The converse is of course true of his *oeuvre*, and hence, one notes that the ambiguous and playful manner of this press release reveals more about the film than what the two men actually say about it. If one were to extrapolate, one might expect *Planet Melancholia* to be a film fully commensurate with von Trier's ironic and provocative temper. Indeed, as an auteur, he would be "making the same film over and over again" as Romer noted, but with the challenge of refiguring the methodology of any new provocation.

Beyond this thesis, the question of von Trier's allegiance to a Danish or Scandinavian identity in a transnational cultural environment might be of interest, especially as one notes linguistic differences between his more intimate films such as *The Five Obstructions* or *The Boss of It All* (both in Danish) and his big-budget features such as *Dogville* or *Antichrist* (both in English). Furthermore, since his projects emphasise the humanist cause in filmmaking, it might be fruitful to examine how his efforts outside of his own projects might contribute towards that aim. For example, his involvement in founding Filmbyen (Film Village), where his

production company Zentropa has been housed since 1997, is an endeavour of worth to film researchers as a model of collaborative networking for production houses and as a creative space for Scandinavian filmmakers. Here, questions of national visual culture and transnational cinema intersect, and who better to be the figure positioned at the centre of this discussion than Lars von Trier?

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