

## Reconsidering *The Idiots*: Dogme95, Lars von Trier, and the Cinema of Subversion?

Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it. —Bertolt Brecht

Sheds are bourgeois crap. —Stoffer, *The Idiots*

**U** sing Lars von Trier's controversial *The Idiots* (1998) as a starting point, I intend to examine the compelling ways in which the infamous Dogme95 manifesto aims to address and correct the failings of contemporary film. *The Idiots* is a remarkable and provocative materialist critique of modern culture in its own right, but its meaning is significantly complicated by its centrality to the otherwise celebrated output of the Dogme95 movement. It received virtually none of the critical acclaim, financial success, or festival awards garnered by the other major Dogme films such as *Mifune* (1999) and *The Celebration* (1998) and is generally regarded as a disturbing and tasteless failure even by those who admire von Trier's more accessible outings such as *Breaking the Waves* (1994) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). However, precisely because of its many imperfections and discomfiting subject matter, *The Idiots* may be the most fully developed and compelling expression of Dogme ideology. The meaningfully artless form and content of *The Idiots* are intertwined in particularly unique and revolutionary ways, enabling the film to critique contemporary film and contemporary culture. The dual target of this assault is precisely what I think has been either overlooked or insufficiently explored in existing accounts of the film, and I hope to demonstrate the extent to which *The Idiots* is only really comprehensible

when viewed in light of its counter-hegemonic aspirations.

As a finished product, *The Idiots* is an uneasy synthesis that attempts to locate an elusive sense of the "real" in late capitalist (film) culture, one in which the spassing (or sustained faking of mental disability) on the part of the film's characters is ideologically reflected by the seemingly amateurish precepts of its construction. In this respect, *The Idiots* is unlike the other Dogme films. Although these works all tend to be technically quite oppositional or at least adventurous, they nevertheless maintain a rigid split between form and content and therefore offer very little sustained political critique of the ideology of mainstream society or cinema. My argument is that *The Idiots* is the only recent counter-hegemonic film work that is demonstrably radical both in its form and its content and, moreover, in its brilliant and playful deconstruction of these categories. An examination of this film and of the debates it is intimately involved in will make it abundantly clear that a reconsideration of this most challenging film is necessary if we are to imagine a different kind of cinema. Furthermore, in ways that are by no means immediately clear, *The Idiots* may even help us imagine a different way of being in our culture.

I suggest that the seemingly perverse and disruptive activity of spassing in *The Idiots* is a self-reflexive allusion to the technical prescriptions of the "vow of chastity" that each Dogme film must adhere to, forging a critical connection between the transformative power of unmastering oneself both as a director and with regard to the practices of everyday life. In both capacities, the rejection of prior ways of being entails an analysis of

those behaviors that are made to seem mandatory by a society whose aim is to maintain the structures that ensure conservative sameness. Far from *only* being a ridiculous and meaningless slap in the face of a too-genteel (film) culture, as formulated by von Trier spassing ought to be *also* read as a *détournement*, a thoughtful and substantial attempt to address the precarious situation of the subject amid what Guy Debord famously termed the society of the spectacle. *The Idiots* can thus serve as a test case when considering precisely how the Dogme95 movement aims to fix what is wrong with both contemporary film and, ultimately (and necessarily), even the culture that produces it and is produced by it. If the film accomplishes this, it obviously does so obliquely. However, it is a leap that I think can be made if we can accept that, when considered as a totality, *The Idiots* asks to be read as an example of what art (and the subject) can and cannot achieve today, what their potentials and limitations are, and what this might mean.

## Dogme95

Before I turn to my particular reading of *The Idiots*, I must first give a brief explanation of precisely what the Dogme95 movement is, what it aims to do, and how it aims to do it. Despite the fact that the administrative department of the group has been recently dismantled in favor of an entirely informal certification process, it seems to me premature to speak in the past tense.<sup>1</sup> But we must look to the cheerier beginning of the movement before any consideration of its ending(s).

In Copenhagen, on Monday, March 13, 1995, celebrated and mercurial Danish director Lars von Trier summoned promising up-and-comer Thomas Vinterberg to his home, where together they wrote a short critique of contemporary film and a set of ten therapeutic rules that Dogme filmmakers must work within. The two men formed a brotherhood and proceeded to recruit new members, primarily from within the close-knit and well-funded Danish film community. Soren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring were the first to sign on, followed by documentarian Anne Wivel, who quit the group almost immediately. As we will see, this national insularity entirely collapsed with the enormous interest in all things Dogme95 following the release of *The Celebration* and *The Idiots* at the Cannes film festival in 1998. The four founding members of the brotherhood (each of whom

has directed only one officially certified Dogme film) began encouraging directors of every nation and skill level to make at least one Dogme film to supplement their own output. Word of the movement quickly spread, and a host of international Dogme films did get (and continue to be) made. Each of these films had to be submitted for approval to the brethren, who provided Dogme certification to those who obeyed (or came close to obeying) all the rules in the manifesto.

Although it was not until the release of the inaugural Dogme films at Cannes in 1998 that the movement became a bona fide film world phenomenon, von Trier and Vinterberg's initial declaration is the starting point for all debates about the strengths and weaknesses of what was meant to be another New Wave. Both directors have confessed that, although they take the movement they have founded very seriously, the manifesto itself was written "after having drunk several bottles of wine and amid bursts of heavy laughter." (Refer to appendix 1 for the complete Dogme95 manifesto.) Now, there is nothing particularly extraordinary about the Dogme95 missive, which a characteristically controversial Lars von Trier later flung from a balcony at the Cannes film festival: these drunken Danes are by no means the only critics to have smelled something rotten in the state of contemporary film. Vast amounts of scholarly and popular work have appeared with ever-increasing frequency that address the extent to which the financial structures of contemporary filmmaking ensure the dominance of a certain kind of often thrilling but easily digestible product whose aesthetic and intellectual quality is subservient to all-important commercial concerns. The present dominance of lavish blockbusters is perhaps only the worst symptom of a broader Hollywood trend away from genuinely original or provocative films in lieu of minor variations on the kind of movies that have shown themselves to be formulaic enough to please everyone. It has been a historically popular chorus, and many points of comparison can be drawn between Dogme95 and various other influential movements in the history of film. (Most obvious, of course, is the French New Wave, which is clearly an enormous formative influence, even down to telling similarities in the wording of its manifesto.)<sup>2</sup> Von Trier has actually issued several prior manifestos attacking various elements of the contemporary film world. However, what distinguishes this document from others like it (other than the amount of analysis it

attracted by comparison) is that Vinterberg and von Trier's vow of chastity overtly claims to contain the remedy for all that ails the body of contemporary film. The key detail here is that the proposed remedy implicitly suggests that in order to effect any real change a significant transformation both of form and of content is required as well as a rethinking of the ways in which the former might participate in the latter.

Whereas many of the early Dogme films received lavish critical praise for their unique visual style and engaging narratives, *The Idiots* looks (and is) both cheap and nasty. Without question, it is aesthetically the most ragged (the most Dogme *looking*) of all the Dogme films, and not necessarily in a good way. Its aesthetic seems more the product of a rushed (it was written in four days and filmed in just over two months) and haphazard construction than of any appealingly daring formal risks. *The Idiots* is so pared down as to seem artless and, at times, just plain sloppy. On several occasions we can actually see the cameraman within the frame, something that is not justified by the film's inconsistent premise that the spassers are the focus of a documentary, one that is apparently supposed to be filmed after the fact. We can clearly see the camera during scenes that are evidently supposed to be off-camera, and even the destabilizing effect of von Trier's handheld camera work also never lets us forget that we are watching an illusion that has been created. This jarring aesthetic is entirely the result of the Dogme rules, which cannot help but to create a film that looks this way if fully applied during production. However, it is the redemptive value of the manifesto rather than its striking visuals that concerns von Trier, who is forced to make a film that must be interesting for reasons other than its gorgeous surfaces. By shifting emphasis from the product to the process, he has made a film that is wholeheartedly about the redemptive value of giving up control, of daring to fail and looking foolish when doing so. It is about allowing oneself the freedom to be careless, to not care, which is quietly recognized as one of our culture's greatest taboos. His seemingly perverse choice of subject matter is a perfect fit for exactly this reason: he has made a film in this way that is simultaneously about making a film in this way and, most importantly, about why he has chosen to do so. In *The Idiots* we see a director considering very carefully both the themes that have previously obsessed him and the way in which he is currently working.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the manifesto, if properly considered, must be read as a fundamentally political and subversive tract. This is the case in two interrelated ways, at least one of which has not wholly been understood either by Dogme critics (as we shall see) or perhaps even by the filmmakers themselves, including Vinterberg, who coauthored the contentious document.

### Repoliticizing Dogme95, Rereading *The Idiots*

The common interpretation of the manifesto is that it is both a critique of a certain kind of film and an aid with which to force a willing director to make another, presumably better or more "truthful" kind. Obviously, this is partly the case. The document definitely raises and is indeed predicated upon some intriguing (and arguably archaic) notions of what is real and what is fake. Is the manifesto not at least in part about the content of form, the inherence of ideology, the imbeddedness of meaning in the structures of what we take for reality? The specific rhetoric of the argument has a decidedly rebellious and countercultural undercurrent, with its sustained allusion to the radical socialist aspirations of Jean-Luc Godard and company. Consider the language used in this paragraph, wherein the founding members bemoan the fact that the transience of their predecessors (amongst other important deficiencies) signaled their ultimate failure: "The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby . . . false!"

In moments such as this, we are made aware of the connection that I consider absolutely central to any evenhanded comprehension of von Trier's accomplishment with *The Idiots*, that is, the implicit connection in the manifesto linking form with content, technique with ideology, medium with message. The implications of this recognition on the part of the brethren have not been fully examined by even their most sympathetic critics to date, but I feel that such an analysis is the only way to access the logic of their argument. Furthermore, this fundamentally controversial aspect of the decree is only really explored in von Trier's film, and it is no coincidence that *The Idiots* was despised for reasons that I suspect are, at bottom, not aesthetic but ideological.

While it seems fairly self-evident that the manifesto aligns certain familiar techniques of film production with a certain familiar kind of film, the full implications of this line of thinking are apparently far less visible. A horrified critic of another text (Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*) that was widely hated for reasons less straightforward than they seemed suggested (in an inadvertent moment of great insight) that "Mr. Ellis's true offense is to imply that the human mind is so corrupt that it is no longer able to distinguish between form and content" (Lehmann-Haupt 18). This is precisely the dangerous equation that is at play in *The Idiots*. Once the structural basis of meaning (and the meaning of structural bases) is made explicit, it is not too great a theoretical leap to consider the inherence of social meaning in all the structures of our constructed culture.

This is the core area of inquiry of what has come to be known as cultural studies. It is the task undertaken, for instance, by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* or by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (to name only two of many), in which we find traces of hegemonic meaning in even the most seemingly insignificant units of our culture. The language of the manifesto shows this awareness of film's enormous ideological value in its repeated denunciation of "bourgeois" film and with its denigration of "bourgeois romanticism" and "the bourgeois perception of art." Their adjectival repetition of this Marxian term is both a sly nod to the manifesto's most explicit antecedent and, crucially, a sort of clue to gaining more substantial insights into its full meaning. The brethren here show themselves to be greater theorists than they have generally been given credit for. It is not solely out of *aesthetic* revulsion that they aim to make antibourgeois films, but they are surely equally motivated by a recognition that the hegemony in whose interests such films operate is itself a thing to be challenged and changed. The bourgeois perception of art that the group blames for the production of bourgeois art is not a natural or inborn perspective, although it presents itself and is generally discussed in precisely those terms. Of course, a bourgeois perception of art is developed in no small part through a sustained immersion in and consumption of the ideological vehicle that is bourgeois art. This seamless (and, therefore, unquestioned) and circular logic is exactly what enables hegemony to function. The brethren are correct in their belief that creating even a very small rupture can throw the entire system up for analysis, precisely by challenging its status as "nature" and

revealing it as being even potentially a subject of analysis. The manifesto is surely, then, ultimately not only "anti-bourgeois cinema" but also "anti-bourgeois," and the films must be interpreted in these terms.

This is an absolutely vital distinction for my purposes. Furthermore, it certainly suggests that the political tameness of even fine efforts such as *Mifune* and *The Celebration* raises important questions about how fully the spirit of the manifesto has been adhered to. Surely the manifesto must be about more than a straightforward modification of surfaces, a switching of aesthetics? Although the argument could be made that Dogme aims to do away with making conventional films by doing away with the methods that make them conventional in the first place, is it not also only reasonable to assume that the works would have a more than purely technical interest in challenging (film) culture? If they are so interested in challenging the implicit or built-in ideology of cinema, must they not also make that apparent by constructing radical narratives, for instance? Both *Mifune* and *The Celebration* fail entirely in this regard, and if they do throw down a challenge to the status quo, it is clearly one more directed at the sphere of film than at the culture that makes them and is in turn made by them.

### "Making Fun": Critical Response to *The Idiots*

The specialists of the cinema said its revolutionary politics were bad; the politicians among all the left-wing illusionists said that it was bad cinema. But when one is at once a revolutionary and a film-maker, one may easily demonstrate that their general bitterness derives from the obvious fact that the film in question is the exact critique of society which they do not know how to combat; and a first example of the cinema which they do not know how to make.

—Guy Debord, responding to critics of his Society of the Spectacle

There are very few lovers of that movie.

—Peter Aalbaek Jensen, producer of *The Idiots*

Most mainstream media outlets (newspapers and magazines, network television shows) virtually rejected *The Idiots* wholesale as a monstrous freakshow, if they acknowledged its existence at all.<sup>3</sup> While reluctantly expressing an appreciation for the boldness of von Trier's

vision (perhaps despite the “dubious shenanigans” of the spassers), even *Sight and Sound* critic Xan Brooks concludes that the film’s “inner-child message is a banal and well-worn one” (35). He adds, “Ultimately, *The Idiots* emerges as a truly fascinating folly, an all-but-impenetrable muddle . . . less a filmic revolution than an Aesop’s fable for anarchists” (35). Less sympathetic is David Sterritt, who concludes in *Film Comment* that the film fails to rise to the promise of the Dogme95 group’s admirable aims. He notes that “[w]hile the best moments of *The Celebration* and *Mifune* demonstrate the appeal of this resurgent humanism, *The Idiots* misses the point of the manifesto von Trier helped create, using self-congratulatory sensationalism as an inadequate substitute for the psychological depth and sociological insight that must characterize realism under any label if it’s to be fully expressive” (76). He also reiterates the common notion that the film is in spectacularly poor taste and an unwelcome deviation from the sensitivity to the marginalized found in, for instance, *The Kingdom 1 & 2* (1994–97). In the final analysis, Sterritt declares that “an artist of von Trier’s stature can surely think of better ways to disrupt the cinematic status quo than by making the Dogma 95 equivalent of a teenage gross-out flick” (76). The recurring and I think most interesting assumption in many critiques, echoed here, is that von Trier’s and his Dogme brethren’s disruptions are aimed exclusively at the “cinematic status quo” and involve a simple replacement of the spectacular with the realistic.

Film should be like a rock in the shoe.

—Lars von Trier

The story of *The Idiots* is decidedly straightforward and decidedly easy to take offense at. *The Idiots* are a group of young, middle-class Danes united by a shared (albeit with varying degrees of intensity) dissatisfaction with bourgeois culture and their place in it. They live together in a country house overseen by Stoffer, the group’s charismatic and highly unstable unofficial leader. The members of the commune express their multifaceted contempt for their culture in what can only reasonably be described as a thoroughly bizarre manner, a manner that is (along with, to a lesser extent, a clearly non-simulated orgy scene) the primary reason for the horrified reception the film has received. The group spass, or



Figure 1. The end of spassing?: Karen faces the music. Courtesy Zentropa Entertainment (1998)

fake mental disability, taking turns acting as minder or spasser, respectively. They do this for hours on end, both privately and very much in public. They spass in fine restaurants, biker bars, and public swimming pools, creating mayhem and acute discomfort wherever they go. They take their act on the road, going door to door selling costly but poorly constructed Christmas ornaments to their wealthy neighbors and taking guided educational tours of local businesses. If nothing else, spassing certainly allows the group the freedom not to participate in the conventional economy, which in some situationist-inspired ways is its own reward. Basically, they prey on the public’s fear and (perhaps) loathing of the mentally ill for a living. Spassing in restaurants means free meals, blackmailing local residents with wheelchair unfriendly driveways provides provisions for days, and they are able to ensure that no one buys the house Stoffer is supposed to be selling for his uncle because of its alleged and uncomfortable proximity to an “institution for retards.”

In a sense, *The Idiots* is also a curious entry in the film-within-a-film subgenre in that part of its premise is that the group members are the subjects of a documentary. The precise extent to which what we are watching is supposed to be a documentary (typically, one filmed by von Trier himself), though, remains highly ambiguous. Obviously, this is the case when the spassers are being interviewed and directly address the camera, an interaction that overtly makes the scene epistemologically clear. However, all of the interviews seem to take

place chronologically after the story is finished, since the subjects tend to speak in the past tense, even when referring to events we have not yet seen. Similarly, although the presence of von Trier as documentarian is explicitly signaled during his interviews, how are we to read those apparently “off-camera” scenes wherein the camera or microphone sporadically enters our field of vision? Are the images being recorded by von Trier the actor playing a filmmaker or by the real von Trier? Because of these seeming inconsistencies, it is never clear if we are meant to interpret all the remaining action as being a documentary or a documentary within a film. The relationship between the two cannot be consistently untangled. This device enables gestures at clarification to be included, as the narrator questions each member of the group about the reasons for their strange behavior, which offers little in the way of definitive answers to the viewer’s questions. This is far more than the standard commonplace bewilderment of the postmodern film, wherein its status as an object is called into question in an aesthetically playful way. In the peculiar case of *The Idiots*, we genuinely do not (and cannot) know precisely what it is we are supposed to be watching, and this is an instability that occurs at numerous levels.

The narrative is inelegantly spare and lumpy, with a digressive and spontaneous rhythm orchestrated around the group’s various diversions and pastimes. By virtue of the film’s central premise, *The Idiots* needs only a nominal story, and, such as it is, it revolves around Karen, a fragile middle-aged woman who (we later learn) is emotionally distraught following the recent death of her infant son. Having left her grieving family and skipped out on the funeral, she meets members of the group as they are all being thrown out of a restaurant because they are unable to prevent their retarded guest from making a scene. Believing they are actually disabled, she agrees to help them return to their home, only to almost immediately discover the truth in the taxi when they burst into clearly nondisabled laughter at the brilliance of their performances. Finding something strangely redemptive—or at least therapeutic—about their spassing, she moves in with them for the duration of the film, even beginning, despite her initial revulsion and firm conviction that they are meanly “making fun,” to spass herself. Other than the aforementioned trips into the neighboring community and a few horrified (and horrifying) visits to the house, the narrative meanders along under the speed of Stoffer’s

occasionally manic insistence that the group members ever more fully commit themselves to spassing. It is all fine and good that they spass with each other and with the general public, but he demands that they take it to its extreme, logical conclusion: they need to return to their mundane middle-class lives and spass there, in front of their friends, families, and coworkers. Obviously, this proves to be an agonizingly difficult task for them, and they each more or less fail to integrate spassing fully into their real lives, which itself raises questions about the practical viability of the resistance von Trier is presenting and/or proposing.

Essentially, *The Idiots* is an exploration of the group’s reasons for spassing. As I will discuss later, no definitive reason for the group’s behavior is unambiguously privileged over another. Certainly, it provides them with the financial freedom to participate in culture in an unconventional and unproductive way, but it is clearly much more than that, always seemingly tinged by a situationist-influenced ideology. Somehow, this activity enables them to remove their socially prescribed masks and comport themselves in a more “genuine” manner. Their mock childlike actions enable them to express parts of themselves otherwise buried by decades of repressive socialization, to return to a (possibly fantasized) site before the subject is formed by discourse. Their oft-repeated claim that they are on a quest to search for their “inner idiots” represents an attempt to see the world from a fresh vantage point, to throw normal behavior under critical scrutiny by (re)presenting its opposite. This view informs Stoffer’s claims that “idiots are the people of the future” and that spassing is potentially “a step forward” for those who are brave enough to try it. Axel similarly suggests that his “anti-middle-class ideology” is based on the idea that “there is something more than meaningfulness and purposefulness,” which suggests that a subjectivity that does not participate in the goals around which our consumptive society is constructed can *only* be attained by something as fundamentally wacky as feigning disability. This argument contains echoes of Baudrillard’s recent position that the very process of becoming meaningful, of generating meaning regardless of its specific manifestation, has troubling repercussions for the subject. He too feels that a rejection of this process has a special kind of value, that because of the terrifyingly advanced state of development that characterizes our present hegemony, the only available kind of

“strategic resistance is the refusal of meaning” (Baudrillard 112).

### Finding Meaning in Meaninglessness: Spassing and Situationism

It is in the way that it spirals between the poles of meaning and meaninglessness that *The Idiots* participates so brilliantly in current debates about the possibility of filming resistance in a subversive way. Ultimately, though, it is arguably its frustrating lack of recognizable sense that sets this film apart from more orderly critiques. It is bewilderingly vague in ways that far exceed the unusual and apparently perverse manner of their resistance: the group is “motivated by an unspecified anger against middle class propriety” (Falcon 12). The shifting object of Stoffer and the rest of the spassers’ rage is so broad as to be elusive. He violently opposes a gloriously diverse host of attitudes and objects and in doing so seems to recognize the extent to which the bourgeois ideology he abhors is spread throughout all of culture, embodied in absolutely everything. The worldview he despises is as present in things (inspiring his irresistible complaint that “sheds are bourgeois crap”) as it is in the genteel concerns of the “Sollerod fascists” who try and bribe him to, basically, take his retards elsewhere. This awareness of the ideological implicatedness of all things in a hegemonic system is an all too rare discussion of one of the core problems of our culture, one that influential Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre articulates in his *Critique of Everyday Life*. In a passage that encapsulates Stoffer’s (and von Trier’s) interpretation of the plight of the common man, Lefebvre explains: “Bourgeois individualism implies the dreary, ludicrous repetition of individuals who are curiously similar in their way of being themselves and of keeping themselves to themselves, in their speech, their gestures, their everyday habits (meal times, rest times, entertainments, fashions, ideas, expressions)” (90). It is this polite yet stifling uniformity, this “mystified consciousness” that spassing is an attempt to fiercely denounce, for it is precisely this conservative sameness that maintains the orderly surface of our culture and firmly positions and imprisons the subject within it.

Despite the most obvious reaction to spassing (that it does nothing, can teach us/them nothing), it is meaningful because of what it says about what meaning *means* and

how it contributes to the ideological base of our culture. It seems a safe claim to make that the outlandishness and *meaninglessness* of the central behavior of the characters has caused the film to face as many critical obstacles as it has. Although it is certainly the case that strange and pointless behavior constitutes much of the on-screen activity of the most popular and mindless entertainments, spassing is strange and pointless in wildly unfamiliar ways and as such operates very far away from the widely understood language of contemporary movies.

Ultimately, *The Idiots* is a difficult and weirdly embarrassing movie to watch because we are forced at all times to obsessively return again and again to the same perturbing question: what are they playing at? Our culture’s attitudes toward the differently abled are nothing if not complicated and confused, and *The Idiots* strikes directly at the awkward core of this perception by throwing our half-examined assumptions back in our faces. Furthermore, not only does von Trier *use* retardation as a metaphor with which to engage the way our social world is constructed, but he also includes graphic sex in the mix. Although the film contains several scenes featuring very explicit nudity, various censor boards have had particular problems with the orgy scene during which the spassers agree to Stoffer’s request for a gangbang that contains a lingering image of clearly nonsimulated penetrative sex.<sup>4</sup> Combining these two taboo areas as explicitly as von Trier does can only cumulatively lead to excruciatingly sustained discomfort for his audience,<sup>5</sup> and this effect is clearly something the director is interested in exploring. Most uncomfortably perhaps, von Trier assembles a cast that includes really mentally handicapped actors among the fakers and has the two groups mingle in what is surely one of the most excruciating scenes in all of film history and definitely the least attractive portrayal of a picnic. As such, it has been widely and predictably criticized on almost every front—dismissed as the crudely and cruelly exploitative work of an attention-seeking provocateur and deemed by more friendly voices as simply a gross lapse in judgment by a volatile director.

How, then, can *The Idiots* overcome the awkward horror it inspires and be restored to what I believe is its rightful place as the most dogmatic Dogme film to date (or certainly the one that has most to say about Dogme95’s *raison d’être*) and von Trier’s most ultimately rewarding directorial outing? It is, I think, essential to



Figure 2. Spassers gangbang. Courtesy Zentropa Entertainment (1998).

consider his film's self-reflexive relationship to the Dogme rules as being brilliantly played out by his characters' spassing. Viewed from this perspective, both *The Idiots* and spassing seem a much more comprehensible and challenging endeavor, one that reflects the outraged but compassionate voice of its creator railing not only at the state of film but also (in his case) about the state of Denmark. Arguably in a manner that is unlike any of his fellow Dogme directors, von Trier's concerns are simultaneously political and cinematic and call into question the relationship between the two.

### Spassing, Dogme, and Disability

When style and content are one, you can't say artificial things.  
—Jean-Luc Godard

I am trying to make a collision of the style and the content.  
—Lars von Trier

The way von Trier approaches his collision of style and content is characteristically original and compelling and is enacted in several different ways. As many critics have observed, von Trier and his Dogme brethren seem genuinely obsessed with disability to a degree that is both curious and startling. Both *Mifune* and *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) prominently feature disabled characters,<sup>6</sup> and, bizarrely, it has been more than a decade since von Trier

made a film that did not substantially engage issues of disability,<sup>7</sup> and not necessarily in a particularly thoughtful manner either. Much of von Trier's body of work has been marked by the presence of ironic referentiality, an aspect of his style that initially earned him great favor amongst critics with fashionably postmodern leanings. What has perhaps gone unnoticed by those who feel *The Idiots* is a massive drop in form is that, unusually, the films to which von Trier is shrewdly alluding here are his own. Certainly, this is an odd variant of the anxiety of influence, even by von Trier's peculiar standards. This is a far more complex and unusual relationship than that which was so lauded in his earlier works, where critics rapturously applauded his more overt and conventional homages to his directorial predecessors. Along with his abundant technical talents, von Trier was previously the object of critical admiration largely by virtue of his elaborate use of intertextual references, a reason to be admired with a good practical base for film scholars. Identifying these allusions seems to be a favorite game of professional critics, who revel in the opportunity created by particularly referential auteurs to flaunt the impressive breadth and depth of their film knowledge. Consider, for example, this passage from Phillip Strick's review of *Europa* (1991) for *Sight and Sound*. He notes that the film takes us "firmly back to the time and territory of *Germany, Year Zero* (or, more suitably, given von Trier's evident allegiances, of Reed's *The Third Man*). . . .



If *Element of Crime* was steeped in Welles and Tarkovsky, *Europa* seems more Bergman and Dreyer (Henning Bendtsen was also the cinematographer for *Ordet* and *Gertrud*), enhanced by such icons as Barbara Sokowa to remind us of Fassbinder and von Trotta, and Eddie Constantine to remind us of the prison-state called *Alphaville* and of a wealth of American influences” (48). This brand of analysis is a much harder sell in the case of *The Idiots*, since the dominant allusions are more internal than external, pointing to the methodology of its own construction. Although it has been variously compared to Klaus Rifbjerg’s *Weekend* (1962) and numerous British films from “the swinging sixties,” these referents are far less important than the mirror that the film holds up to itself. It can be argued that its allusions are to process rather than product, to methods of construction rather than to completed films. The spassing behavior of the characters must be read in terms of the self-imposed restrictions that the Dogme filmmakers adopt in order to locate an elusive sense of the real. Viewed in this way, the liberating unmastering involved in spassing is (also) a comment on the positive impact of intentionally not using the bag of technical tricks at a director’s disposal. Despite their gimmicky appearance, both of these practices seem to have real redemptive, revolutionary, and critical potential, which (thus far) only von Trier has significantly approached.

The charismatic and, arguably, brilliant Stoffer should then be considered as a more-or-less direct representation of von Trier himself, someone who experiences great frustration as he tries to passionately coax his fellow malcontents to reconsider the way they function in opposition to a system they find abhorrent. Similarities exist that exceed the obvious correlation between the two men simultaneously forcing people to act in a particular way. Certainly, the two figures have similarly grandiose and not entirely stable demeanors and seem equally forceful in their (like-minded) critiques of their culture. In *The Humiliated* (1998), Jesper Jargil’s documentary about the making of *The Idiots*, von Trier’s ideological kinship to Stoffer is quite evident, as it also is in his published diaries about the ordeal of making the film. *The Humiliated* is significantly enlivened by von Trier’s moodiness and sporadic outbursts of unhappiness, most of which echo his protagonist because they are motivated by a conviction that his actors are not spassing enough for him or for the right reasons. Stoffer is simi-

larly disgusted by his housemates when he feels they are not wholly giving themselves over to the cause, particularly in the later scenes, when he forces them to attempt to move spassing out of the commune and back into their “real” lives. The experiment is for him, and certainly for his director if we count the tears he causes (and sheds) during the making of the film, infinitely more important than any amount of hurt feelings or emotional distress.

If such things should be taken into account, we could also look to von Trier’s childhood of communal living and “champagne socialism,” where he was raised by his parents among similarly free-spirited artists and cultural activists. To find the origins of Stoffer’s construction, we might look as well to other formative biographical information such as the political activism of von Trier’s earlier years as a member (as were his parents) of the Danish Communist Party. However, all that really needs to be shown with regard to this connection is that it supports the notion of a direct theoretical connection between the self-imposed disability of the director and the spassers. It is not insignificant that, of all the rules von Trier and Vinterberg could have established with which to remedy what ails the film world, they chose the ones they did. The rules could have been very different, and there are countless (arguably “better” or more practical) ways in which the rules of filmmaking could have been manipulated to various other effects. Any survey of the numerous manifestos that have surfaced throughout the history of film reveals the extent to which, although the problems that are identified have an unfortunate tendency to remain the same, the solutions take on wildly divergent incarnations. Despite the brethren’s repeated proclamations that the specific rules themselves are irrelevant (although this is a telling claim that should not be dismissed), there seems to be a direct relationship between the redemptive amateurishness called for in the manifesto and the meaningful spassing presented in *The Idiots*.<sup>8</sup>

If we can accept that Stoffer is a sort of stand-in for the brilliant, misunderstood, and possibly deranged director, then the once-loathsome behavior of the film’s characters can be viewed in a far more compelling light. Spassing and Dogme directing, once aligned, are interesting primarily because of the serious problems that they each simultaneously articulate, critique, and aim to rectify in their respective realms of film and reality. The

manifesto at least aims to be a guide to creating a kind of tonic that will heal the bloated body of contemporary film and replace it with something radically other. Its primary aim is not to create legions of jagged, grainy films but to counter “‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today.” Despite much heated recent debate about the potentially liberating effects of digital technologies, it is worth bearing in mind that whether this liberation be financial or artistic or both, it is only potentially so. Various products of the digital revolution such as *Star Wars Episode 2: The Attack of the Clones* (2002), including those with a more seemingly Dogme visual style such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), are no less conservative and reactionary because of the technology involved in their construction. Nor is Dogme95 really about these new gadgets in any necessary way. Rather, it is a “rescue action” specifically intended to devalue a certain kind of conventional wisdom about what films should be by negatively articulating what is wrong with them and showing how they could be different. A full explication of what is wrong with contemporary movies is hardly necessary or possible here, given that the problems that ail Hollywood films are all too evident. As budgets exponentially inflate and films necessarily cater to the absolute lowest common denominator, it is now difficult not to consider mainstream film as a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying absolutely nothing. Obviously, deviations from this broad and reductive appraisal exist, but it increasingly seems as if the multi-plex logic of contemporary movie making is ensuring that truly original, thought-provoking, and (particularly) politically engaged films never surface. If nothing else, *The Idiots* and its ideologically inflected construction must be viewed sympathetically as an attempt to disable this process by doing away with the technologies that facilitate it.

### The Politics of Film: *The Idiots* and Embodied Resistance

The startling idiocy of *The Idiots*'s mock disabled characters symbolizes an embodied resistance: they relinquish their mastery of the world around them and become in some ways born again. It is this kind of experimentalism with theme and form that subverts our expectations so superbly in *The Idiots*, a film that never for a moment allows us to be lulled by its technical mastery

and forces us to experience it in a genuinely engaged way. We are repeatedly made uncomfortable by our awareness of our own involvement as von Trier masterfully controls his material (even as he has unmastered himself) so that the central premise never becomes static and predictable. For instance, in one of the most jarring on-screen moments in recent memory, the activity of the spassers seems to be becoming soothingly familiar to us. They live happily in their beautiful country home, spassing when they feel like it, taking trips into the local community in order to horrify residents. These memorable forays prompted *Artforum* critic Howard Hampton to note that “von Trier’s scraggly bunch of sadist-idealists are like slacker descendants of the Baader–Meinhof gang: emotional terrorists” (20). As things seem to momentarily level out, von Trier injects some truly unsettling tension into the proceedings by introducing an actual group of mentally disabled adults from a nearby home who join the spassers for lunch. To say that this intrusion is awkward is a gross understatement, and it forces us to reevaluate precisely why our characters do the things they do. The accusations of mean-spiritedness directed at spassing both within the film and in response to it seem most reasonable at this moment. This discomforting technique is used throughout, as the value and meaning of spassing are repeatedly thrown into sharp relief by various events (including multiple revelations about the potential madness of various group members), demanding that we continually interrogate the film as it shakily unfolds before us.

It seems unlikely that *The Idiots* could be effectively made without the confines of the Dogme manifesto, as it is precisely these technical limitations that help it achieve its bewildering overall impact. The look and sound are deceptively simple, as it lacks many of the stabilizing devices that are traditionally used to give an audience clues about how to read a film and to recognize its attitude to its subject matter. These technico-responsive pointers are made highly conspicuous by their absences, throwing into relief the extent to which they affect the way we read a film. We are given no musical score with which to clarify moments of emotional ambiguity, the selective addition of which could easily transform sections of this film into slapstick comedy, stirring drama, or high tragedy. Because of the sporadic and inconsistent on-screen presence of the director (both literally and suggestively, as reflected by the handheld

camerawork) we are never sure exactly what we are viewing. The shaky camerawork also steals from von Trier the cherished power of a director to convey meaning and add symbolic commentary on the action through *mise-en-scène*, as the film entirely does away with carefully constructed shots and makes little use of foreground and background. Similarly, the Dogme rules also strip the director of the ability to establish mood or thematic tone through lighting and optical trickery as they are entirely at the disposal of what light can be captured on their rudimentary cameras.<sup>9</sup> This unusual lack of cinematic direction is integral to the film's success, as it makes unusually difficult demands on the viewers, requiring us to adopt different interpretive strategies.

Characteristically, the narrative offers little assistance in this regard, as it too seems designed to obscure the possibility of casual consumption. It also goes out of its way to preclude the kind of easily earned pleasures that conventional cinematic narratives can afford. As the manifesto dictates, it is clearly not generic and contains no action that is typically superficial. Even when a recognizable structural device is used, it is engaged in a way that subverts our expectations. The film within a film trope, for instance, presents moments when group members attempt to explain their collective project. However, these speeches possess little explanatory value and if anything only function to further deepen our confusion at their behavior. Acting as documentarian/interviewer, von Trier echoes our growing irritation with the group members' inability to explain their seemingly insane actions with any kind of consistency by demanding "an understandable summary" and complaining that he has "heard seventeen different versions" of their reasons for acting as they do.

At first, the film seems to use the device of presenting strangeness to an audience through the eyes of an outsider with whom we can identify in order to ease our discomfort. Again, we become rapidly aware that this will not be the case. Although Karen initially seems cast in this explanatory role by virtue of her status as a "normal" outsider, she almost immediately loses her ability to play this part. As soon as she joins the group she not only develops a need-motivated affinity with the spassers but also tries to help them and ultimately begins spassing herself, all of which preclude her from playing the role of the unbiased source. Again and again we are led to believe that we are nearing a stable truth



Figure 3. Spassers at play. Courtesy Zentropa Entertainment (1998).

(which we need more and more as the film progresses into ever stranger terrain) only to have it repeatedly deferred and problematized. Using this method of repeated subversion, von Trier is able to posit spassing as a maddening theoretical mystery at the heart of his film, the meaning of which (or lack thereof) must be constructed by the individual viewer based on scant and contradictory evidence. None of the spassers seem fully in agreement over what it means, giving conflicting reports about why it helps them. Thus for Karen what it seems to be is an attempt to work through her terrible grief at the death of her son with communal support. Ped the doctor seems to be using the group as dissertation research, and advertising executive Axel just wants to get laid. For the enigmatic Stoffer it seems a purely countercultural obsession, a spit in the face of the superficial and spiritually bankrupt bourgeois society he despises. He is clearly the most heavily invested in the mission, critiquing the performances of the other spassers and giving us the most frequent and articulate insights about the subversive power of "getting in touch with one's inner idiot." But, again, given the manic outbursts of screaming and running naked through suburbia (which on one memorable occasion require that Stoffer be physically restrained and then bound and left alone to calm down), he may well be mad. As a clarifying window into the film and a possible explicator of its odd logic, group leader or not, the nude wailing man tied up in the attic is not without problems.



Figure 4. Stoffer: the mad spasser in the attic. Courtesy Zentropa Entertainment (1998).

As one might expect by now, the conclusion of the film offers little clarification of that which has preceded it.<sup>10</sup> We learn about Karen's dead child as she returns to her home to be reunited with a family who has not seen or heard from her since the day of the funeral she did not attend two weeks prior. Previously, Stoffer, distraught at what he perceives as a general lack of commitment to the redemptive cause of spassing, had assigned various group members the task of returning to their daily lives and spassing outside of the communal support offered by the group. This experiment initially seems an abject failure as spasser after spasser refuses to relinquish or even try to loosen their social masks in their "real" worlds. Karen's situation is much more dire, as her family members are already both worried about and furious at her because of her unexplained absence during a time of great hardship. Regardless, as things start coming apart between the spassers and Stoffer becomes deeply suspicious of anyone's willingness to transport spassing into their real lives, Karen agrees to try it and returns home. Shortly after entering a house filled with palpably unsettling tension, she begins to spass, twitch, and drool food all over herself to her family's astonishment. Enraged, her husband brutally slaps her across the face in order to silence her and halt her admittedly bizarre and inappropriate behavior. Susanne, who accompanies Karen from the commune for support, says, "That's enough now, Karen. Shall we go?" to which Karen responds after a terribly weighted pause,

"Yes," and they quietly leave. On this highly ambiguous note, the film concludes.<sup>11</sup> Again, it is for us to decode the cryptic finale and to relate it to the rest of the film.

My analysis does not end with any definitive statements about what this film means or even what I think it means, which should hopefully be clear by now anyway. Rather, I would like to simply suggest once more that an open-minded reconsideration of *The Idiots* may help us create films or live in ways that are genuinely subversive, that can help us to fix some of the things that are wrong with contemporary films and contemporary culture by shedding a necessarily strange and defamiliarizing critical light on them. Von Trier's film should be regarded as possessing at least the potential for substantial transformation in both these spheres, for providing us with a new critical perspective on each. Stoffer, the director's double in my reading of the film, sums up what both men (real and fake) hope to accomplish through their peculiar and intertwined projects: "If you could see things differently, you might see the beauty of them."

## Appendix I. The Dogme95 Manifesto

Dogme95 . . . is a collective of film directors founded in Copenhagen in spring 1995.

Dogme95 has the expressed goal of countering 'certain tendencies' in the cinema today.

Dogme95 is a rescue action!

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck.

Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The *auteur* concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby . . . false!

To Dogme95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the media becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase 'avant-garde' has military connotations. Discipline is the answer . . . we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition!

Dogme95 counters the individual film by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie has been cosmeticized to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The 'supreme' task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the '100 years' have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated? . . . By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not 'high art'. As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.

The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.

To Dogme95 the movie is not illusion!

Today a technological storm is raising of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation.

The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

Dogme95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

'I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by Dogme95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images, or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)

4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)

5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.

6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)

8. Genre movies are not acceptable.

9. The film format must be Academy 35mm.

10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work", as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.'

Copenhagen, Monday, 13 March 1995

On behalf of Dogme95

Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg

## NOTES

1. Recent critical interest in Dogme95 suggests its continuing relevance. In 2001–02 two books were published dealing specifically with von Trier (Jack Stevenson's *Lars von Trier* and *Lars von Trier: Interviews*, edited by Jan LumHoldt), one with *The Idiots* (John Rockwell's *The Idiots*), and two volumes with Dogme95 in general (Jack Stevenson's *Dogme Uncut: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang that Took on Hollywood* and *Purity and Provocation: Dogme '95*," edited by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie).

2. Richard Kelly's lively *The Name of This Book Is Dogme95* examines this connection at greater length, recognizing links between, for instance, Dogme's "expressed goal of countering 'certain tendencies' in the cinema today" and François Truffaut's "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," from *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1958. He more generally concludes that "if I held this Manifesto up to the light, I would clearly discern the shadow of Godard, smoking a small cigar and chuckling. Lacing between every line was a red thread, linking these Rules to Godard's pronouncements and actions across four decades" (Kelly 10).

3. Instances of critical neglect are curiously recurrent in Dogme95 scholarship, especially when addressing von Trier's contribution. Consider, for instance, the inexplicable omission of any mention of *The Idiots* in the following positive assessment of the movement. In a rapt review of *The King Is Alive* (2001) in *Film Quarterly*, Martha P. Nochimson catalogs "the more prolific output of Lars von Trier, which includes *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*. (Von Trier has complicated the group's credibility with the arguably illusionist rhetoric of both *Waves* and *Dancer*, and by producing a thoroughly hallucinogenic television series, *The Kingdom*, outside of the dogma canon.)" (48). It is surely significant that in a discussion of Lars von Trier and Dogme95 the author mentions every film he has recently directed other than his only actual Dogme film. Examples of this convenient scholarly amnesia abound in the criticism with weird and telling regularity, highlighting the extent to which *The Idiots* fits uneasily alongside the more accessible work of von Trier's Dogme brethren.

4. Because of this scene, *The Idiots* has been seen as emblematic of a new movement toward increasingly explicit sexuality in contemporary cinema in two recent articles on the subject. See Williams; Falcon.

5. This discomfort has also translated to the films facing censorship problems throughout the world. In Ireland it was banned entirely, not because of the nonsimulated sex scenes but for "moral" reasons. Many nations released an edited version, notably the United States, where the film was held back for two years and then finally released with ludicrous floating black bars covering some of the more explicit sexual images.

6. Rud, one of *Mifune's* three principal characters and its primary source of comic relief, is mentally retarded. His retardation and comic appeal are perhaps not as unrelated as we might like. Julien, the titular character in *Julien Donkey-Boy*, is schizophrenic. Because he spends a lot of time with other mentally ill people, and because almost his entire family seems at least mildly off balance, the argument could easily be made that every one of Harmony Korine's characters has massive psychological problems, diagnosed or otherwise. Regardless,

the Dogme directors' attraction to disability is both widespread and persistent.

7. *Europa*, released in 1991.

8. Von Trier's most recent "side-project" reveals the extent to which he is also interested in the idea of establishing cinematic rules regardless of what those rules might be. A film he made with Danish documentarist Jorgen Leth called *The Five Obstructions* recently debuted at the 2003 Venice Film Festival to critical acclaim. The premise is that Leth agreed to remake his cult 1960s short film *The Perfect Human* five times according to whatever rules von Trier wished to impose upon him. Characteristically, von Trier insisted upon Leth's total adherence to completely strange and arbitrary "obstructions" (some versions must be filmed in Cuba or India, but no locals must be visible; one must be a cartoon; one must feature only shots that are visible for half a second; and so forth), which had the understandable effect of driving his friend to distraction.

9. One of the more memorable issues surrounding the production and release of the film involved a feud between von Trier and his producer (and Zentropa Studios cofounder), Aalbaek Jensen. Jack Stevenson explains the basis of the dispute, which genuinely threatened the future of Zentropa:

On 20 August 1999, while *The Idiots* was out in a wider world splitting critics and public alike, von Trier got what was for him some disturbing news from a couple of the other Dogma brothers. They had heard from a couple of "loose lips" at Zentropa's film lab that Aalbaek Jensen and Videke Windelov had instructed them to use a post-production filtering process to lighten the film. . . . Von Trier was furious and fired off press-releases damning this breach of the Vows of Chastity (vow 5: Optical work and filters are forbidden). Windelov was in the US when she received von Trier's "completely hysterical, completely insane" phone call. He demanded that all prints be recalled, which was of course impossible.

Aalbaek Jensen and Windelov apologized but countered that they felt themselves economically pressed to lighten the film, otherwise it would be too dark to see anything. Reportedly von Trier had actually already seen a print of the lightened version and hadn't noticed. . . . A meeting was arranged between von Trier and Aalbaek Jensen. There was much shouting and yelling before von Trier stormed out four minutes later. The fate of the studio seemed to hang in the balance. (132)

While order was eventually restored, this episode shows the extent to which von Trier is both serious and passionate about these technical limitations. As the brothers suggest on the Dogme website, "There is an implicit duplicity in the Dogma manifesto. On one hand it contains a deep irony, and on the other hand is seriously meant."

10. Nor, incidentally, does the introduction. Despite von Trier's multiple use of typically informative devices (such as Karen's initial outsider status and the film's mock documentary), we learn very little because we are not present for the genesis of spassing. In this respect, the film strangely begins some time after its subject does, and we learn virtually nothing about how, when, or why the group initially came together and began to spass.

11. Indeed, we might read the final scenes as not constituting the film's close at all. Just as the film seems to begin after the beginning, so too does the ending apparently happen before the end. Large portions of the documentary footage that is disseminated throughout the "real" story are clearly meant to have been filmed long after the group disbanded and ceased to spass and therefore technically occur after the film's final scene.

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