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# Abstracts



## LESS DOGMA THAN ONE WOULD CARE TO BELIEVE

Nuria Vidal

The Dogma movement was born at the 1998 Cannes Festival with the screening of *Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg) and *Idioterne* (Lars von Trier). These two directors had drawn up a document in 1995 known as the "Dogma 95 Manifesto" (to which Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring were later to add their names), in which they defended a truth-revealing cinema, with no tricks, no special or "cosmetic" effects, filmed with a handheld camera, far removed from genre movie conventions, and shot on location. Dogma films are generally choral films placing greater importance on the relationships (almost always problematic) between the members of this human group (always from the more-or-less middle classes, never marginal) than on subjects like sex and love which, while present, don't generally play a leading part. The "Dogma Certificate" has been earned to date by 25 films of widely varying nationalities, including France, Argentina, Korea, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, the USA and even Spain. The Dogma phenomenon has yet to demonstrate the extent of its influence: whether it will serve as the foundations for a revolution in the world of cinema or whether it will simply fade away into the history of film as just another movement.

## IN PRIVATE: A PORTRAIT OF THE DANISH ARTIST

Carlos Santamarina

Aping the game proposed by Lars von Trier in *Europa*, the author sets out on a step-by-step itinerary aimed at offering a second person account of the filmmaker's personal and professional career. Thus begins a conspiratorial itinerary tinged with the light of the free education received by Lars von Trier as a child, showing his mother's influence in the gestation of his artistic vocation, or his first works as a director. The biographical low-down moreover takes an in-depth look at the two trilogies made by the filmmaker in the 80s and 90s, while placing emphasis on the influences that can be detected in his work or, from another point of view, the part played by the Danish director in creating the "Dogma 95 Manifesto". The itinerary comes to an end with a last note on the work currently in the making by von Trier.

## LARS VON TRIER AND HIS SHORT FILMS

Zigor Etxebeste

Becoming a filmmaker was young Lars von Trier's dream on attempting to enter the Danish Film School for the first time at the age of 17. Despite initial rejection from the institution, he decided to go ahead and make films by himself. He made his earliest movies with his mother's super-8 mm camera, although his first real works are *Orchidégartneren* (1977) and *Menthe-la bienheureuse* (1979). His second attempt at entering film school was a success. He filmed three more shorts between 1979 and 1982 with the help of his usual collaborators at that time, the cinematographer Tom Elling and the editor Thomas Gislason. Two of those works served as stepping-stones on the way to his first feature film, *Forbrydelsens element* (1984). These two movies, *Nocturne* and *Befrielsesbilleder*, are analysed

from an aesthetic point of view. They also show the strong visual influence in their making of Russian director Andrei Tarkovski.

## BREAKING TV, SHOOTING IN THE DARK

Quim Casas

Lars von Trier's relationship with television, while not particularly productive, is highly interesting. His first experience dates back to 1987, when he took another look at the tragedy of Euripides in the shape of *Medea*, made for television and based on a screenplay signed by Dreyer (together with Preben Thomsen) but which the latter was unable to film. Von Trier tells the tale of Medea – whom, after being abandoned by Jason, killed her two children – with no concessions, underlining with quasi-cruelty the most tragic aspects, and particularly the death of her children. His second work for television, *Riget* (also known by its English title, *The Kingdom*), is a series comprising two parts, made in 1994 and 1997. *The Kingdom* is, in fact, a ghost story set in a big Danish hospital standing on the ruins of an ancient cemetery. This series reflects a certain amount of influence from and similarities with another two series likewise directed by famous filmmakers: *Twin Peaks*, by David Lynch, and *Homicide*, by Barry Levinson. It moreover served to bring von Trier closer to a bigger audience.

## THE ELEMENT OF CRIME

Jesús Angulo

Lars von Trier launched his commercial filmography with *The Element of Crime*, a film defying classification with which he initiated his trilogy on Europe, completed with *Epidemic* and *Europa*. Its sophisticated production, which obeyed the original storyboard to the letter, unfolds in a claustrophobic atmosphere, with disturbing sets and a highly unusual use of colour. Behind this technical scaffolding is a process of personality transfer, during which policeman Fisher finally vampirizes the very criminal he has to unmask, while von Trier proceeds with a complicated reflection on the hypnotic power of cinema.

## EPIDEMIC

Ángel Sala

Lars von Trier's second feature, *Epidemic*, a deliberate exercise in denying the mannerism of his first work, *The Element of Crime*, is likewise a movie far removed from narrative conventionalism, which encourages a *fantastique* reflection on artistic creation and employs gentle irony regarding the generic aspect of cinema. *Epidemic* is therefore closer to the director's latest stage than first impressions would seem to imply, although its enthusiastic approach and a certain naivety in the elements comprising its thesis save it from the irritating self-satisfaction of films like *Idioterne* or *Dancer in the Dark*, the pretentiousness of which has been inflated by those who have mistakenly read them as radical and theoretically aggressive works, when they are in fact part of the immense parodic catalogue put together by a kamikaze author capable of shooting himself down in flames in order to achieve a provocative and definitively destructive effect around the very concept and conception of traditional cinema.



## EUROPA

Antonio Weinrichter

Von Trier brings his "Europa Trilogy" to a close with a film simply named like the trilogy itself: **Europa**. The Danish director's most affected movie, **Europa** places greater emphasis on the way the images are formed (with frequent transparencies, colour changes, a combination of colour and black and white, etc.), than on what actually happens in the screenplay and to the heroes of the film. The hypnotic tone of his two earlier works (**The Element of Crime** and **Epidemic**) is even more strongly pronounced, thanks not a little to the deep voice of the film's narrator, Max von Sydow. The movie takes place on a train shortly after WWII, mixing traces of Hitchcock with the German cinema transplanted into America by directors like Lang or Sirk. More than a journey by train or through Europe, this film is a voyage to the imaginary side of cinema. **Europa** marked a radical about-turn in the way von Trier makes cinema, ending in the "simplicity" of Dogma.

## IDIOTERNE

Antonio José Navarro

The storyline of **Idioterne** is set around a group of alleged middle-class non-conformists whom, in an act of hypothetical rebellion against upper-class hypocrisy, decide to act as if they were mentally handicapped, attacking the most basic pillars of society, reason and logic. **Idioterne** is a sombre film, totally devoid of humour, which moves in the terrain of visceral emotion and, as an exponent of the Dogma system, suffers from implicit, encumbering moralism (though not morality). Von Trier's admitted objective was to make a film with absolutely nothing in common with **Star Wars**, although he most certainly failed to reach the heights of earlier precedents with which Dogma directors have a great deal in common (such as the French *Nouvelle Vague* or the British *Free Cinema*). The antisocial rebellion of **Idioterne** is lacking in frankness, no more than simple protest; it is emotionally frigid, philosophically and politically void. What was intended to be a virulent attack on upper-class aesthetics by promoting ugliness, coarseness and ignorance, turns into nothing but yet another form of aesthetics, if possible even more irritating than the one it claims to denounce.

## BREAKING THE WAVES

Carlos Heredero

**Breaking the Waves** marks a very obvious point of inflection in Lars von Trier's career as a maker of films. This is a work that has absolutely nothing in common with the "Europa" of the Danish director's first trilogy, a space of fictional metaphor serving as a backdrop for his obsessions. The formalistic and aesthetic research so typical of the "Europa" trilogy gives way in **Breaking the Waves** to a search for emotion in its purest of states. This change is the result, on the one hand, of von Trier's reaction against the "castrating" education regarding emotions transmitted to him by his parents' left-wing ideology, and, on the other, of his conversion to Catholicism. The until then omnipresent masculine heroes are likewise replaced by the prominence of idealistic, generous women, capable even of taking their own lives to defend that which they love. Although it

does respect some of the precepts to be found in the "Vote of Chastity" taken by Dogma movies, certain aspects (the melodrama, the use of a computer to colour certain shots, etc.) definitively deny **Breaking the Waves** the right of belonging to this same movement. Having turned the film with a hand-held camera, von Trier places greater stress on the sincerity of expression than he does on the grammatical side of the language, so lending the performance a naturalistic tone placing even greater emphasis on direct communication with the spectator. The film principally revolves around the figure of Bess (Emily Watson), a half-demented, half-saintly transgressor who confronts the Calvinist severity of her community (and, hence, of society in general) with her pristine innocence by means of an erotic sacrifice which finally flourishes into a miracle.

## DANCER IN THE DARK

Carlos Losilla

**Dancer in the Dark** is a basic film on Lars von Trier's filmography for a number of reasons. In the first place, because it constitutes the peak of his strange and unusual relationship with the Dogma movement, of which he has been an active though ambiguous and questioning member in his own productions as a filmmaker. In the second place, because it bases the overcoming of these links on a drastic gesture of defiance: the choice of affectation in its purest of states, i.e., musical melodrama. And thirdly, because the result permits us to establish its author within the panorama of today's cinema, while leading us to doubt much of what his images "seem" to say.

## THE MYSTERY OF THE DARK LIGHT

Ángel Fernández Santos

Reactions to the screening of **Dancer in the Dark** at the Cannes Festival in 2000 varied between total rejection and unbounded enthusiasm. Even Bergman, after having disqualified von Trier's work, finally pronounced his unreserved praise for **Dancer in the Dark**. The film is structured around the concept of paradox, based on the supposition of a transgressive director enveloped in a project directly taken from the most classic of film-making traditions. The clash taking place in the movie between opposing elements ends in their fusion: opposites become complementary to one another, anti-ethical patterns unite. This, already seen in the very concept of the melodrama, the merger of music and struggle, takes the shape here of a voyage towards total suffering along a road lined with tremendous joy. **Dancer in the Dark** is enveloped in a mysterious dark light. It wends its way along the knife-edge, never giving in to absurdity. Mysticism and naturalism hold hands as von Trier succeeds in convincing us that the most natural way to describe mystical happenings is by means of almost documentary images, shot with a hand-held camera and at ground level. The plausible and the impossible, the real and the imaginary entwine perfectly. Thus, von Trier sets a delicate ballad against a cold industrial background, while making a murderer out of the almost perfect personification of goodness and sacrifice in the shape of Selma. The same Selma who gaily denies her own death as she consciously heads towards her mortal destiny in one of the most beautiful endings ever filmed.