

After Dogma seen from Sweden

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What does the Swedish film landscape look like 15 years after the proclamation of the Dogme 95 manifesto? What's the impact of this movement? How has it influenced Swedish cinema? What I will offer today is a personal account of Dogme's imprints on a few Swedish films and filmmakers. In order to do that, I will begin with some reflections on the manifest and how it can be understood, in cultural and theological terms. I will also say something about how the Dogme movement has been received by Swedish critics.

What is Dogme 95? The suggestions have been many. A cynical hoax to get publicity and make money or an idealistic crusade against bourgeois individualism manifested through the conventional Hollywood genre film. Is it the most radical film-making movement since the French new wave or is it a contradictive rip-off of the same movement? I would say that Dogme 95 is an expression of both idealism and pragmatism. It is an aesthetic ideal and a politically motivated movement. It could be described as a commercial brand, an industry, which produced no less than 34 movies from all over the world until the certificate was made available in 2002. It could also be described as a form of art installation, a minutely planned spectacle extended in time for more than a decade, to which the provoked reactions are part of the oeuvre. It is not irrelevant to describe it as a form of joke, although a thoroughly serious one, about what films ought to be made and why.

The manifesto is permeated with religious language, which I cannot resist from commenting. It begins with a call for resurrection of the movie, supposedly dead since the 1960s. The ten rules are labelled Vows of Chastity. This should not be misunderstood as mere cosmetics. The idea behind the manifesto could be understood in analogy with the Christian monastic tradition.

Through abstinence one gains freedom or creativity. By saying no to the excesses to the world, one reaches authenticity as a believer or as a filmmaker. Furthermore, the denunciation of the director as an artist echoes of the Christian mystics' denunciation of the self. The final claim to seek the truth, rather than personal success or artistic integrity, points beyond the horizon of the individual. Moreover, the impossibility of the quest, refraining from personal taste, also echoes of the Gospel of the Mount, be perfect!

In other words, film-making is serious business. Lars von Trier and his brethren could thus join hands with the Swedish author and theologian Lars Hartman, who in 1952 stated the following:

“The Great task of the Beaux Arts is not to put a vase of flowers in the office or let the dancers distract some busy sultan. The Arts should not adorn reality, but uncover it down to its bones. They should break the devilish circle of illusions by stating it.”

Understood in this way, the manifesto contributes two important impulses to film-makers. The first is a set of very specific pragmatic rules, which enables directors to do film differently, without huge budgets, focusing on the story and the actors, stimulating an acting style closer to real life, and to non-verbal communication. The second is a more general impulse to think outside the box, to capture the adventure or tragedy of ordinary life. Åke Sandgren, Swedish director of the Danish dogme film *Truly Human*, has said that Dogma is a “resuscitation of the political cinema”. I understand this to be consistent with Hartman's view on Culture and Religion. The task of these twin brothers is not to mollify the people but to challenge them. Doing so, might also have political ramifications. Thus, the war on the mainstream film is not simply a matter of taste, but part of the quest for truth.

It is clear to me that the Dogma project belongs to very particular contexts. To begin with, it is part of a new wave of realism in Danish cinema. And it is also part of a history of film-manifestos with numerous predecessors as well as successors. It could furthermore be perceived as a part of Lars von Trier's multifaceted yet consistently playful and ever-changing artistry. At the same time, it has become an international movement, serving as a form of anti-establishment guerrilla group, or as "a small nations' response to globalisation" as Mette Hjort puts it in the introduction to the anthology *Purity and Provocation*. Dogme 95.

How then has the dogme manifesto been received and interpreted in Sweden, the country of Ingmar Bergman, another small nation, which is both similar to and different from Denmark? Making no claims to comprehensiveness, I have made some observations based on 20 something articles on the dogma phenomenon in the major Swedish newspapers from the last decade. To begin with, I was surprised that there has been so little debate and that so few connections have been made between dogme manifesto and Swedish film. Above all, I have not seen any deeper analyses of the ideological aspects of the project. A general observation is that the phenomenon evokes respect as well as envy. Some critics question the originality of the concept, what's really new here? Would e.g. *Italian for beginner* be worse with a steady camera? Other critics applaud the strategic smartness and combined effort of the Danish film industry and bemoan the inefficacy of the Swedish counterpart, i.e., before the Millennium hype. In 2008 the Danes Film Institute launched a campaign called Raw Film, giving relatively small amounts to many projects, very much in consistency with the dogme ideals. In contrast, the strategy of the Swedish Film Institute is to give more money to fewer projects. Comparisons between the Swedish and Danish film industries above all have to do with the commercial success of the latter, a fact that could be seen as proof that dogme's analysis of the state of affairs is correct.

Of the 34 official dogme films, only one is Swedish, Vladan Zdravkovic's *Babylon* from 2001. The film has not received international distribution and it is not considered as one of the important or memorable ones. Yet, although very few Swedes have attempted to follow the rules, I would suggest that several have been inspired to think differently, to make films about ordinary life, i.e., to follow what I labelled as the second impulse of the manifesto. In the following I will try to show how this has been accomplished.

Summarizing a decade of Swedish film is a daunting task. In the time span after dogme, I would say that two Swedish film makers stand out from the rest: Lukas Moodysson and Roy Andersson. When 26 Swedish film critics ranked the ten best Swedish films of the past decade (in *FLM*), Moodysson and Andersson were the only film makers with two titles each on the list.

Lukas Moodysson

Lukas Moodysson is the angry poet who turned film director. His debut film, *Fucking Åmål*, came in 1998, the same year as Vinterberg's *The Celebration* and von Trier's *The Idiots*. It is a story about two teenage girls in the god-forsaken small town Åmål, where one of the girls is in love with the other. Being a 14 year-old and gay in the Swedish country-side is not an easy thing, certainly not in 1998. Moodysson tells this story with great subtlety and authenticity. I would say that *Fucking Åmål* follows the intention of the dogme manifesto in that it is about reality, forcing the truth out of characters and settings that rarely have been depicted before. In accordance to the rules, it contains no superficial action. In terms of form, the use of hand-camera and fast cuts is frequent although not constant. The film music is produced by a Swedish contemporary pop group that the two girls could have liked. Although not in accordance to the rules, I would say that the music contributes to the film's sense of authenticity.

Moodysson's next film, *Together*, came in 2000. It is set in a hippie collective in the 1970s. The movie could be described as an exploration of the meaning of

love and community. The idea of the “free love” of the collective is juxtaposed with the possessive ownership of an abusive husband. *Together* is definitely a romantic comedy and the script is not too original. And in terms of form, the hand-camera is rare. Above all, *Together* was praised for its costume, scenarios and dialogue, perfectly capturing the atmosphere of the 70s. Although *Together* represents a movement away from the dogme ideal in comparison with *Fucking Åmål*, it remains true to the idea of presenting a part of “reality”, the shortcomings and benefits of the idealistic Left.

Lilja 4 ever (2002) is Moodysson’s first overtly political film, dealing with the issue of trafficking. The film follows the life of 16 year old Lilja and her trail through the sexual slave chain from Russia to Sweden. It is definitely a “feel bad” movie with no pauses of hope for the audience. Lilja is abandoned by everyone, her mother, her best friend, her boyfriend, her “employer” etc.. and the movie ends with Lilja committing suicide. Upon its release, Moodysson said that he wanted to change the world through the film and it was also shown in the Swedish parliament. Thus, making this film was not only about seeking the truth, but of shovelling the truth down the throats of the privileged middle-class audience and forcing it to do something about it. This is not the first film on the sex trade, but it is perhaps the first film on the issue consistently told from the girl’s perspective. The numerous intercoursés are filmed from her perspective. The audience sees what Lilja sees, i.e., the faces of the men.

Moodysson’s first three films were praised by the critics and they also became commercial successes. His next step was a move away from the big audiences, towards a more experimental approach to making films.

In 2003 he made a documentary together with Stefan Jarl about the riots at the EU meeting in Gothenburg, *Terrorists – The kids they sentenced*. The purpose with the film was to give voice to the young people who were sent to

prison for their violent protests against the European Union and against Globalisation. Moodysson makes no effort to hide his own political conviction. He stands on the side of the protesters, a fact made explicit through rhetorical questions, jokes about the government etc... Clips from war sites or global environmental disasters are juxtaposed with the interviews, indicating that the different phenomena are part of the same problem, capitalism. Understood in this way, *Terrorists* may serve as a similar kind of ideological critique as *Lilja 4 ever*, although expressed in a more explicit fashion. Capitalism turns people into slaves. Through *Terrorists*, I would say that Moodysson comes close to the political pamphlet. This is a documentary in the same vein as Michael Moore.

Moodysson returned to the theme of the sex industry in his next film, *A Hole in My Heart* (2004). This is a film about the making of a porno film. It is also a film that lends its aesthetics from reality TV. Lock people up in a small apartment and see what happens. A grown up son is also present in the apartment, as an interfering witness to the human breakdown. *A Hole in my Heart* appears at first glance to be the very opposite of *Lilja 4 ever*. This time, the perspective is not the girl's but above all the porno director's. It could be described as an exploration of misogyny or as an exposure of the violent destructiveness of the industry, as it appears in the life of three individuals. The film provoked a discussion of ethics, in similarity with the one von Trier faced in shooting *Dancer in the Dark*. What is a director allowed do with his actors? What is film and what is reality? Is it possible to make a film on sexual humiliation without humiliating the actors involved?

If *Lilja 4 ever* was a politically correct tool to combat trafficking, *A Hole in My Heart* is ideologically much more ambivalent and therefore, more painful to watch and perhaps more original in artistic terms. *A Hole in my heart* is the film where Moodysson comes closest to the dogme ideal, both in terms of form and content. Handcamera is used throughout the movie. Documentary clips from heart and intimate surgery are frequent. The movie is about unveiling a

part of reality that all of us know exist, but few of us are personally acquainted with. The film is not just a film. It could also be described as a commentary on or theory of filmmaking, exposing the exploitation of the actors and, perhaps, a voyeuristic tendency in the audience. The critics were divided on behalf of this movie. Some thought a masterpiece, others considered it a sell-out. Very few saw it, which is no surprise, since it makes Lars von Trier's *Anti-Christ* seem like a kids' tale.

In 2006, Moodysson took yet another step towards the experimental. *Container* is an 82 minutes stream-of-consciousness monologue set in small claustrophobic room full of small objects and garbage. The movie shows the inner life of a woman, split in two, one in the body of a man. It could be psychologically disturbed person, suffering from megalomania and self-destructiveness. The theme of sexuality resurfaces of course, combined with religion. Does she think she is the mother of Jesus? If there was little narrative in *A Hole in my Heart*, there is absolutely no narrative in *Container*. *Container* is perhaps more adequately described as a video art than as a feature film. Does it force reality out of its characters and settings? It surely makes ample use of hand camera and it deals with the mundaneness as well as extraordinariness of the human psyche, rarely captured on film. In that sense, *Container* exhibits dogme like qualities. At the same time, the world of *Container* is doubtlessly the calculated construction of the director, crammed with symbolical objects, which many would call a particularly "arty" and "sought for" version of reality.

Where do you go from here if you want to surprise your audience? To Hollywood, if you are Lukas Moodysson. *Mammuth* from 2009 could be described as a light version of *Lilja 4 ever*. It shows what the system of foreign worker does to, above all, mothers and daughters. Every mother lets her kids down, the New York surgeon, their Philippine maid and the Thai prostitute. When the slacker husband attempts to beat the system, paying the prostitute for not having sex, he ends up sleeping with her in the end all the same. *Mammuth*

is a very far cry from the dogme rules. Moodysson deals with the same issues as he always does, sex and capitalism. This time, however, he operates within the confines of the conventional melodrama, presenting his most predictable movie so far. Is it a coincidence that not only the form but also the moral of the movie appears more conservative? The political edge of *Mammuth* can be understood as directed at the women. They shouldn't leave their kids alone.

Through his 7 films in little more than a decade, Lukas Moodysson has earned recognition as one of the more innovative Swedish directors. Consistently exploring the theme of sexuality from different perspectives, he has exposed new parts of reality on the screen. Above all in *Fucking Åmål* and *A Hole in my Heart*, he has made use of dogme aesthetics as well as ideals. With the exception of his second film *Together*, all his films qualify as "feel bad".

Roy Andersson has been less productive, but is perhaps a more internationally renowned director. Following the commercial failure of his second feature film, *Giliap* in 1975, it took him no less than 25 years to return to the silver screen. In the meantime, he made TV commercials and wrote a book - *The fear of seriousness in our time* (1997) - where he outlines his artistic as well as political vision. Andersson's critique of the entertainment business is vehement. To him, art in general and film more specifically, is about exploring human existence. In his inauguration speech at Gothenburg International Film Festival this year, Andersson stated that film is part of our "spiritual heritage", which is now threatened by the forces of stupidity. In his critique of capitalism, Andersson shares common ground with Moodysson. His critique of the conventional Hollywood film also has much in common with the manifesto brethren. Most specifically through the distaste for the auteur film, or the emphasis on narrative. In terms of form, Roy Andersson's films appear rather in contrast to the dogme aesthetics. Andersson's late movies are characterized by long steady shots of carefully constructed environments, without cuts, and with an almost fierce and

“unnatural” light as its signum. Yet in contrast to the dogme brethren, Andersson consistently use amateurs rather than professional actors. Although the acting style of the “ordinary people” in Andersson’s movies is different from dogme, it is definitely a way to explore the “authenticity” of real life.

Songs from the second floor (2000) has been described by critics as the strangest movie ever made. That is certainly an exaggeration. The *Songs* consists of a number of very long shots of ordinary people with no connection to each other. The movie depicts the madness of capitalist society, or the deconstruction of the Swedish welfare state, in a surrealistic or absurd manner which some interpret as comedy. The irrational and cruel market has taken the place of God. The priest has no comfort to offer. The cross is reduced to a commodity, proven to be worthless. A young girl is sacrificed, to no avail. Doubtlessly, the movie is a fierce protest against the contemporary development of society.

You, the living (2007) is very much constructed in the same manner as *Songs from the second floor*. This time, the idea of exposing the truth is at the centre. Beneath the polished surface of tradition and economic success, evil abides and injustice rules. The absurdity of the following court scene is telling. The judges drink beer. The defence’s attorney is crying but incompetent, paralyzed by his emotions. At the execution, the audience eats pop-corn, as if they were watching a film, hardly an irrelevant association in this context. How can we combat the culture of stupidity, what is our responsibility as human beings? In one of the strongest scenes, in my view, a woman prays for the greedy. Breaking the convention of the individual intercessory lament in pietism, the woman speaks to God about the evil system, e.g. the sinful executives and the government.

Roy Andersson’s fictional world is full of symbols, loaded with critique of society at large. Yet his films also demonstrate compassion with ordinary people and the belief that resistance is possible. I would say that

Andersson's pathos and use of amateur actors is in line with the ideals of the manifesto, although his artistic vision takes different expressions.

A few number of promising film debuts could in some ways be said to be inspired by dogme. Jesper Ganslandts *Falkenberg Farewell* from 2006 has been described as the *Fucking Åmål* for guys. It is about a group of lads in their 30ties who return to the town of their childhood for a last summer. What they do not know is that one of them means this literally. He takes his life in the middle of the film and the rest is about how his mates deal with the sorrow. This is a film showing the ordinariness of grief, and it was selected for competition at the film festivals in Venice and Toronto. But we have seen the story many times before.

Robert Lillhonga's *Hating Gothenborg* (2007) is an extreme low-budget movie, who received economic support only for its postproduction. Like *Falkenberg Farewell* it is a move about boys seeking their identity. In this case, the authoritarian leadership of a gang of unemployed angry young men is challenged by a cheerful cousin, coming back from a trip to India. The film certainly has its qualities, much thanks to its dogme like means of production. But the film lacks in the originality of the script and of the somewhat stereotypical characters.

Another promising movie is Johan Kling's *Darling* (2007). It tells the story of the economic and social decline of a young upper-class woman. The film very convincingly shows how little it takes to fall from grace, to be rejected by one's peers. The film captures the cold inevitability of the system but also that compassion is possible. One could say that Johan Kling deals with the same issues as Roy Andersson, but on an individual level. What does capitalism do this young girl? How is she confined as a human being by the economic system, in failure and success?

When 26 film critics ranked the best Swedish films of the past decade another debut came out first, Ruben Östlund's *Involuntary* (2008). And it is a good choice. *Involuntary* is definitely one of the more original and at the same time provocative Swedish films made since the dogme manifesto days. I would say that it in many ways shares the political vision of Roy Andersson, but that it does so through an innovative visual form, serving as an aesthetic challenge to the dogme rules. *Involuntary* presents five novellas that only are connected through a common theme, never explicitly defined, which perhaps could be described as the danger of conventionalism, how the individual succumbs to peer pressure, even when he or she knows that it is utterly wrong. Östlund shows that this happens regardless of gender, age or class. A 60-year old man is hit by a rocket at a New Year's Eve celebration. And he refuses to go the hospital, despite his pains, because he is the host of this party, and cannot step out of this role. A teacher teaches her pupils on the hazards of peer pressure, making an experiment in class to illustrate her point. Shortly hereafter, she watches another teacher who uses violence against a pupil. Is she going to report or not? She finally does so, soon becoming ostracized by her colleagues. A reunion of former soldiers goes wrong. One of the men is sexually harassed. He calls his girlfriend in the middle of the night and asks her to come and get him. She comes but he has changed his mind, his loyalty with the male group is stronger.

Now how are these ordinary but painful life experiences turned into film? No hand-camera is in sight here. Like Roy Andersson, Östlund uses long uncut shots. But the central event occurs in the background. The perspective is that of the distant on-looker, a position which has strong similarities with "real life". When someone is treated unjustly, we rarely have front-row seats, it happens at the fringes of our own existence. Yet, do we not have a responsibility to act all the same? Ruben Östlund is very subtle in his critique of conformity. But the questions are there for anyone to listen. *Involuntary* exposes the illusion of individualism in contemporary society. It is also a demanding film to watch,

with neither story nor conclusion, with the core events literally difficult to see. *Involuntary* exhibits no qualms about seriousness, to paraphrase Andersson. Let's just hope that this was not a one-hit wonder.

I would like to end this presentation with the most recent promising debut. Iranian-born Swedish director Babak Najafi won the Church of Sweden's film prize in Gothenburg this year for his film *Sebbe*. It was awarded for best debut in Berlin in February, and it received the ecumenical prize at the Children and Youth film festival at Zlin in June. *Sebbe* is an emotionally intensive drama about a 15 year old boy who lives with his mother. She is not a good enough mother. Rather, she is a dysfunctional one to say the least, committing her son to severe psychological abuse. Yet she is also herself a victim, of grief, depression, underemployment and isolation.

The jury (consisting of Lisbeth Gustafsson, the new bishop Tuulikki Koivunen Bylund, Mikael Ringlander and Tomas Axelson) found that the movie convincingly depicts the new poverty of the suburbs, the Swedish white trash if you want. The movie thereby shows a part of reality that rarely features in Swedish film. It could be described as in line with the new realism trend in Denmark, although the specific dogme rules not are followed. The chain of events consists of very small but emotionally significant acts. The film could be understood as an excerpt of a daily destructive routine, where the individuals are confined by austere economic conditions, living in small, claustrophobia-inciting spaces. Does it end in hope or despair? The jury of the Church of Sweden perceived a "visual gospel" in *Sebbe*, interpreting the change of light and *Sebbe*'s final departure as indications of a new beginning. Not everybody shares this view and at the moment, a debate is going on about what the term "gospel" actually signifies. This is cultural theology at its best, I believe, when an artistic work can challenge how the church perceives its identity and its mission. It is also a promising sign of new times in Swedish film. After a decade

of too many conventional feel-good comedys, Östlund and Najafi demonstrate that there are filmmakers with artistic integrity and passion also in Sweden, contributing to the truth-telling vision of their dogme brethren.

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