

Dogmatic *Festen*

How a viewer could not escape Thomas Vinterberg's Festen

By Marie-Lise Bétemps

"I must confess that when I started to work on a film about incest on video and in Danish it wasn't exactly driven by cynical commercial ambitions - I had no idea it would reach this far," says Thomas Vinterberg¹. But *Festen* did reach this far: 578 439 viewers in France, 403 611 in Denmark², a succes all over Europe, distributed in the U.S. and winner of many prizes among which the "jury's prize in Cannes (1998).

Festen's presentation in Cannes became a happening because Vinterberg's film is the representative of the DOGMA 95 films, subscribing the "vow of chastity". DOGMA 95 is a manifesto written by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995 in order to "rescue" the cinema. It praises a pure (not to say purist) realism of the film image and its ideological exploitation, outside the artificiality of the American dramas. To achieve such a goal, they propose a set of ten normative rules, which praise a coming back to the basics of filmmaking, the so-called "vow of chastity".

The press coverage was enormous and the international sales very good: not only art houses wanted the film but also major distributors. In France, *Festen* was shown in major film complexes, along with the American blockbusters. We are well aware that such a media coverage and good distribution meant a great deal in the film's success but we will not focus on this part of the film life. We believe there is an inner strength in the film, which makes it appealing to people no matter what the public relations around it are.

The viewer always seems to react the same way, whatever knowledge he has about film-making, film maker's personality or even about the DOGMA 95: Vinterberg recalls how some journalist in Cannes were too emotional to talk with him after seeing the film³. Even three years later, at the evocation of *Festen*, people still get the gooseflesh and recent screening of the film⁴ had the same tremendous impact on new audiences.

It seems that, in front of this piece of art, people loose their thinking capabilities to only experience it with their feelings and even their body. The object of this article is then to try to find out why and how the film is so powerful.

Festen starts out as a very conventional and formal family reunion in the Klingenfelt's mansion, far out in the countryside. Typical upper class, the family seems to be perfect but soon enough we discover that one daughter has committed suicide a few months ago, that the youngest son is not really invited... Anyway the

party starts out well enough until Christian, the eldest son, delivers a horrifying toast in which he casually describes (in almost clinical detail) how his father sexually abused his dead twin sister and himself when they were children. From this point on, Christian will have to fight for the truth to be finally revealed, for his story to be believed. The party, under the German toastmaster's care, will try to continue as if nothing happened. On the contrary, the family will try to get rid of Christian: the film then follows the well known process of a family secret revelation and the hard way the victim has to go to be listened to.

Christian will first be asked to apologize, he will be accused of fantasy, of loosing his head, he'll be asked to give details. His mother will remind the guests how he always loved to tell stories and had trouble to distinguish fiction from reality. But despite all the obstacles, the truth is finally revealed and this, without causing the worst (a murder, a second suicide): the shame, only the shame is taken from the victim's shoulders to the torturer's.

A provocative theme but a classical storytelling

A story we've heard since the mid 90s, we know how, in our traditionally patriarchal cultures, the problem of child abuse is serious and how numerous the victims are. Little by little, the incest taboo is being lifted up thanks to the many books, films, trial reports and other TV reality shows. It is listening to one of those reality-radio-shows⁵ that Vinterberg first heard the story. A young anonymous man explained on the air how he had told in a speech he made at his father's birthday party about his father's sexual abuse of him and his twin sister when they were children. Vinterberg then tells us a story that we all know from TV, the newspaper, or the local bakery's gossip but such stories are so far beyond our understanding that we keep on wanting to avoid them, not to believe they are accurate. Even if it became fashionable to talk about that subject (in Cannes, another film about incest, *La classe de neige* tied with *Festen* for the "jury's prize"), it remains a very disturbing matter and the setting chosen by Vinterberg is one of the most provocative. We can all relate to "the family reunion", recognize patterns and at the same time, the very formal atmosphere creates a stage for Christian's revelation. This echoes TV shows such as *Rikki Lake*. In those shows, like in *Festen*, the "live" audience decides what's right and wrong and the anonymous one is given a little help to make its decision.

The good patriarch, the cheery mother, the senile grand parents and the four typical children are people we've met before. Christian the eldest son, successful restaurateur in Paris, who has the gravity of his first born and the paternal pressure on his shoulders; his twin sister Linda, the other side of the coin, the for ever depressed one, the ill child. Helene is the outsider, the conventionally provocative one: anthropologist, with the black boyfriend. And finally Michael: for ever baby who cannot find his place between the patriarch and the patriarch to be; the only one who has a family of his own but has trouble dealing with people. Any viewer knows such characters. They are very representative of any family, in any class of the society and since they are very stereotyped, they are easy to relate to and to recognize.

Besides using his knowledge of the family, Vinterberg uses the conventional break between the good servants, living downstairs and the masters, keeper of the appearances. Part of the house for such a long time, the servants know the truth and will help the good one to succeed. Here Kim, the cook, who provokes a meeting between Christian and his father after the first speech, organizes from downstairs the key hiding and takes over the taxi search. Pia (forever in love with Christian) gives Linda's letter to Christian, which is the final step for the truth to be revealed.

Besides these first figures of "noble savages" is Gbatokai, Helene's black boyfriend, who has nothing primitive in himself but his name and his ability to "feel" what's going on even though he does not speak a word of Danish. The family's reaction towards him is a very cheap denunciation of racism, totally out of the plot and the only secondary story which does not find a logical resolution.

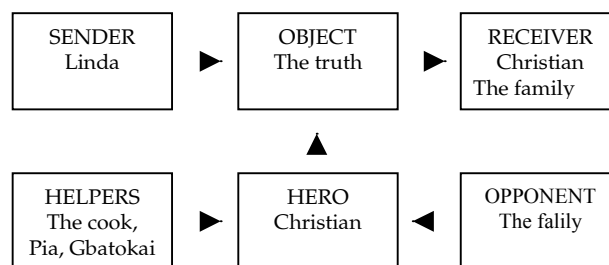
Making a clever use of such stereotypes and many others allows the viewer to feel connected to the film, to be part of it because he can easily recognize patterns he knows from real life and, as we will see, from his cultural background.

A fairy tale atmosphere

The out of the world universe, the upstairs/downstairs division but most of all, Christian asks Pia to join him to Paris gives the feeling that we are watching a fairy tale. The good blond hero has eradicated the bad one helped by the beautiful princess who was locked in the castle and the finally formed couple will, for sure, live happily ever after.

But not only the atmosphere, the narrative plot can also be related to a tale and Greimas' actantial model⁶. Putting *Festen* into this frame, we can see the plot as follows: the hero, Christian wants to reach the truth, his father's consent. On the way of his quest, he'll be helped by Kim and Pia, and hindered by his entire family. Linda, especially her death, pushed Christian and encouraged him to have the truth revealed so that he, Pia, the entire family could profit from this revelation and be able to have a better life afterwards. This is the classical scheme of any fairy tale, in which everyone plays his part and act according to his place in the frame.

Greimas' s actantial model



The Aristotelian "dogma"

"Shooting must be done on location", "Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden", "The director must not be credited". Those DOGMA 95 rules echo the well-known rule of the three unites underlined by Aristotle in *On the Art of Poetry*⁷. In this text, he states that any drama should be a text in which the characters in action build a story, a story which must be believed by the audience to be taking place "here and now" for the first time. That is to say that there is no intervention whatsoever of the author of the text. This coincidence between those two DOGMAs might explain why Vinterberg and his co-scenarist, Morgen Rukov chose such a theatrical framework to tell their story. But the manifesto also states that "predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which [film makers] dance. Having the character's inner lives justify the plot is too complicated (...)" and the goal of the DOGMA 95 films was then to counter this superiority of plot over characters. Despite their good intentions, Vinterberg and Morgen Rukov realized at a very early stage that they could not avoid dramaturgy and found themselves caught in the classical narrative patterns.

The film structure deeply relates to classical theatre, following the five acts division and focusing a lot on the conflict notion emphasized by Aristotle.

Act 1. Exposition:

The three children arrive in the mansion, out of the world. They welcome guests. We know that one sister is dead, that Mikael was not invited.

Act 2. Building up of the conflict:

In her dead sister's room, Helene finds a letter and overreacts. The film editing makes the entire family overreact.

Helge's welcoming speech.

The dinner starts and Christian makes his speech of truth. This is the point of no return.

Act 3. Dramatic knot, jammed situation:

The guests are locked in the house because the servants have hidden the car keys.

Helge, Else, and Helene try to convince Christian to apologize. Mikael and the uncle try to throw him out of the house but he keeps on coming back and accusing more and more.

Digression on the racist scene with Gbatokai.

Act 4. The peripetia:

Helene is asked to read in front of the family the letter Pia has found in the aspirin box (and given to Christian). They have no choice but to believe the unbearable truth.

Climax: Mikael's patricide's temptation.

Act 5. Resolution:

The entire family gather together again for breakfast, the father is "dethroned" by Mikael but gets to close the action by a parallel speech to the one he gave at the beginning. He leaves the room but the mother stays.

Christian asks Pia to follow him to Paris.

So, if it was not for the racist dinner scene with Gbatokai, the film economy would be close to perfect and respectful of Aristotele's idea of necessity and unity: the story must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole⁸. Indeed, the film, carried by Christian's will, makes everything converging towards the same resolution and conclusion.

At the end, to quote Corneille: every action [is] completed and achieved, that is to say that in the event which closes the play, the spectator [is] so well informed of every character's feelings that he leaves with a restful mind and has no doubt about anything anymore.

Here the spectator is especially relieved about Christian's situation: he's been introduced as the lonely walker coming to make justice in this outside world (with an obvious reference to Clint Eastwood's figure in many westerns) and he will leave, smiling, with Pia at his side...

A well oiled machinery

This provocative story is told in a fairy tale atmosphere and following classical theatrical rules, but such a story could be told under a different conception of cinema: cinema as an art of life, or cinema as a medium to describe actions. To acknowledge those two conceptions, Barthes in *Analyse structurale des récits*⁹ distinguishes between two types of event in filmic storytelling, the so-called "kernels" and "catalysts":

In a film, if a phone rings, a character can either answer it or not; an alternative is opened and the event is therefore a kernel. But between the ringing of the phone and the answer (or the decision not to answer), the character may scratch his head, light a cigarette, curse, etc. These are catalysts - they do not open an alternative but accompany the kernel in various ways.

Here in *Festen*, following Aristotle's conception of necessity, Vinterberg chose to have a very fluid and effective narration with almost nothing but "kernel" events, events that logically induce each other. There is no time out in which the characters could develop.

From the beginning there is a goal to reach and no matter what, it will be reached. No extra event will

interrupt, or take the viewers attention away from this goal. Reading the DOGMA 95, one could think that the movies made under it would have a taste of Cassavetes, an independent American filmmaker who focuses a lot on the actors freedom and would give all the technique away just to capture their beings: in a movie like *Husbands*, there is not much happening in terms of actual action or events. Life is just carried to its highest level, the poesy contained in reality is emphasized. But in *Festen*, we are closer to the classical machinery in which there is no space or time for doubt or wonder, so this gives tremendous rhythm to the film and keeps the viewer very focused.

The aim of DOGMA 95 was to rescue the cinema from many things among which dramaturgy. To that extend, *Festen* betrays its own selfproclaimed ideology, following very classical schemes to tell its story and not allowing much freedom in the film construction to let the "characters' inner lives" intrude. Escaping its own DOGMA, the film is under another strong one that almost no storyteller can escape: the Aristotelian one and in terms of film storytelling, under the famous "Hollywood DOGMA" which praises classical effective well told stories. Vinterberg did not create a new way of telling stories but chose a provocative theme to tell an effective story, using all stereotypes anyone faces in his daily life as well as very classical patterns of storytelling in order not to lose the viewer, to keep his attention. The film is not provocative all the way, there are boundaries that it does not cross and this very reassuring for the viewer.

A claimed "avant-garde" ideology**The DOGMA 95 Rules**

DOGMA 95 is an attempt to return to the cinematic innocence and simplicity of the Lumière, an attempt to make a fiction film carried by actors but with a *cinema vérité*¹⁰ aesthetic. This means that there should not be any technical contingencies interrupting the actors' interpretation on the set, the camera should just be here to record their performances and subordinate itself to them. Through editing, manipulation of image and sound is then totally forbidden: the film should be what happened on the set and nothing else.

There are many conflicts in the DOGMA 95 ideology because they do not make themselves go all the way and refuse to totally give up control. They force themselves to have an authentic set, authentic props. The actors have to wear their own clothes but at the same time, they are still actors and this is the most illusional element of filmmaking. How can DOGMA 95 praise the refusal of illusion and at the same time praise the presence of actors, and emphasize their work to such a tremendous extent? The DOGMA brothers focus on minor details which are not answers for authenticity, such as the use of colour (is a Lumière film not authentic because it is in black and white?) and at the same time do not give rules about content (or anecdotal) or storytelling.

Vinterberg thought he could "counter the mediocrity and the conventional in the most conservative of

our times' art form - namely filmmaking¹¹ in following this set of rules but since there is no strong philosophical ideology behind it, it is rather complicated to renew anything. Filmmaking is as much about shooting than about editing and if the will to denunciate illusion is very strongly emphasized with the "hand held camera" rule, there is no rule about the denunciation of illusion in the editing process. On the contrary, a DOGMA 95 film creates the illusion that things really happened the way they appear on the screen because, as seen before, the rules suggest an Aristotelian drama type of story. The greatest illusion created by the cinema, namely the illusion of reality is then not countered but emphasized.

A "home video" taste

This illusion of reality is even more emphasized through the use of video (not stated in the DOGMA 95 but cheaper than 35mm and easier to handle). In any other film, it would have created a distance between the audience and the film and given a feeling of "avant-garde", because the image is not the one we are used to on a large screen, but here Vinterberg chose to film a family reunion with "our" video camera.

In such a context, the grainy, shaky pictures can only remind the viewer of the so many "home movies" he's been asked to watch. Vinterberg and Dod Mantle (the cinematographer) play a lot with the amateur gimmicks such as the abusing of the zoom (when Helge first talks in the hall and the camera looks for Christian and zooms) or the abusing of too fast camera movements (sensation, when the guests gather in the hall, that an hyperactive five year old is in charge of the image).

They also introduce very typical "home movie" shots such as the opening shot on the idyllic Danish summer fields which remind of so many boring vacation films. The use of video, far from distancing the film and its viewer, gives a feeling of "home made" and creates a great closeness between the film and the audience. We are watching what could be the perfect "home video", in terms of aesthetic and even of action. Don't we take out the video camera hoping something would happen?

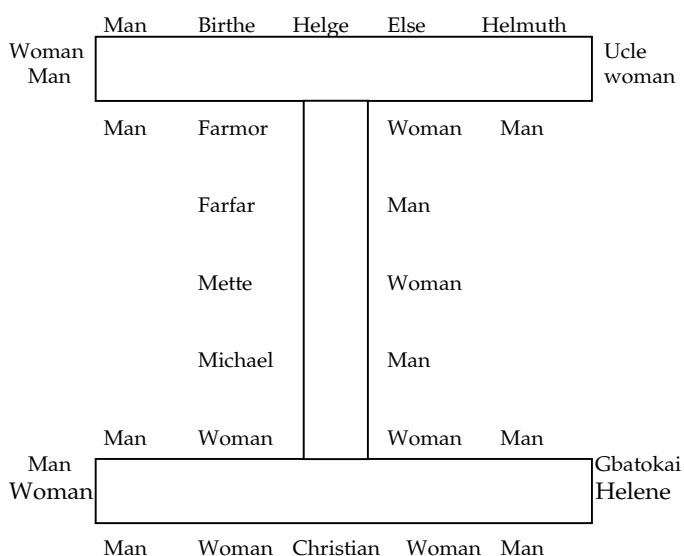
Besides the home movie style which tricks us, it appears that Vinterberg was unable to free his film from the many "DOGMA's" and conventions film are put under and ended up doing a (almost) classical "mainstream" film. He made a DOGMATIC film, but DOGMATIC in the sense that no film, or almost no film can escape the conventional rules of filmmaking. To illustrate this point of view, we will give a closer look to the dinner scenes, and mostly on Christian's speech of truth.

A table setting

The huge table is dressed as an "H" and the 32 guests occupy the entire room. The setting is unusual in the way that it seems rather complicated to talk to anyone but the one seated next to you. Some guests almost have their backs to each other. Such a design creates a very formal atmosphere, inducing both distance and

unity between the guests: they cannot talk to each other but they occupy the entire room.

The table fits a family concerned with appearances, ways, customs, and traditions. Hardly shown at once, this unified table is deconstructed by very fragmented and short shots which do not allow much of an inner map for the viewer. He then needs the camera's mediation to meet people and is under its full will, the same way the guests are under Helmut's care to go through the evening.



The focus is almost exclusively on the five family members, spread around the table due to respect to the etiquette and to the family hierarchy. Helge and Christian, the patriarch and the patriarch to be; Mikael in between, not having found his place yet; and Helene on the side, of course on the side.

The scenes are all shot in the same way; close shots of the guests, mostly the nuclear family, larger shots from behind Christian or Helge's head with a noticeable depth of focus and occasionally, large shots from the ceiling with a very grainy picture.

There is never an establishing shot of the room. The first shot is taken from the inside, following the waiters entering the room with the dishes: the camera follows them from the other side of the table. The focus is more on them than on the guests and this will be the case several times; on the second opening, the camera is in the waiters' way and it has to move back to allow them in. Relevant of the omnipresence of the camera in the film, those shots show how the camera keeps on intruding in a very organized ritual and is meant to be intrusive: picking over plates, looking behind closed doors, being inside and outside at the same time.

In the first dinner scene, the first few shots introduce the family members interacting with the group. While Mikael and Helene are, most of the time, shown with their partners or interacting with the group, Christian remains the "lonely walker" of the beginning. The frame isolates him, in opposition to the frame in which Helge is shown with the cheery Else. But Christian does not

fill his entire frame, there is an empty spot next to him, Linda's one. The emptiness is, in a way, fulfilled by the "behind Christian's head" shot as if Linda were looking behind her brother's shoulder to the entire family recreating some kind of unity.

Pressure on the viewer

The dinner scenes are all extremely fragmented. Christian's first speech for instance lasts four minutes and counts no less than 40 shots. Opening with a shot on the glass being clinked (this will almost become a gimmick all along the film, and is also very traditional and respectful of the etiquette), the scene goes to the kitchen where the cook is expecting the speech. Christian challenging his father with the two speeches is presented under two angles: close ups of Christian and shots behind his head giving the impression of a huge distance between the son and his father, each at one end of the table.

On the first sentence: "When Dad took his bath", the camera shows a close up of Helge, very still, with Else laughing heavily at his side. On the next few sentences, the camera successively focuses on the family members: Mikael drinking and not paying much attention, Helene looking around kind of worried (in a previous scene she was shown in close ups, smoking nervously) and another shot of the kitchen. The camera has pointed out to the audience the ones it has to focus on, the ones who are interesting, and the ones it should expect something from.

The more provocative and precise the talk gets, the more classical the filming becomes: a very traditional "shot/reverse shot" editing successively shows close shots of Christian and his father, creating a closeness between the two most distanced characters in the room. This one to one relationship created by the framing and editing gives the opportunity to the audience to decrypt every single expression on the protagonists' faces in order to try to find a winner to this duel.

Up to this point, they are both in control: Christian is shown in a still shoulder shot. He moves his head, cannot look into his father's eyes but keeps telling his story in a very neutral tone, without any pathos or tears. Helge, shown in a very close up does not show any feeling: he is neither surprised nor shocked. Both protagonists play their part very well and introduce confusion to the viewer: the reaction does not fit the accusation.

This very ritualized duel is only broken by a shot on Helene, very nervous, almost breaking a glass, and if the viewer still had any doubts about the truth of the speech made, he is then heavily reminded with the shot, that Helene had found her sister's letter. Two over the head shots give a view from both sides of the table, showing people not reacting at all, and the two extremely calm and confident protagonists. Helge does not even move his head in the shot from behind him.

After the speech, five reaction shots report the people's thoughts: Mikael looking down at the man who starts to clap, two ladies wondering about what has just been said, Mette lost, and Helge with his for ever smil-

ing Else. The editing has built a heavy tension between Christian and Helge, as in a duel but the ending is very deceptive: the guests have no reactions and the waiters still pay obedience to the father.

There is a tremendous violence in this scene: the editing creates a great tension with, on the one hand still shots (it is the first time the camera calms down) and on the other hand an extremely provocative discourse. The "still" camera and the fast editing induce more tension than the moving camera. Hardly given a large shot to make up his mind and to rest from his declaration, the viewer is under pressure of the guests' non-reaction and is then asked to react. The reactions shown do not fit the talk and here one can raise the question of the superiority of image over speech.

An omniscient human camera eye

It is commonly assumed that images are more accurate than speech because no speech is ever objective while we still like to think that an image cannot lie because it was there at some point in front of the camera. Here, Vinterberg chooses to make Christian's speech carry his story and not to show anything from the actual facts which did happen. Since he is well aware that people, following St. Thomas' precept, only believe what they see, he introduces to the viewer shots of Helene and of the kitchen so that no one can escape and take the family's side. The viewer is shown, from the beginning, a guilty father. This viewer knows much more than any of the characters because the camera eye is everywhere, even in the walls. The mansion seems covered with cameras, like in *Big Brother*, and nothing said or done in this house can escape the camera eye.

At the beginning of the film, Helene says, jokingly, that the house is haunted. And that might be the trick Vinterberg found to solve all the enunciation problems raised by his use of DOGMA 95: the dichotomy between a human camera and an autonomous Aristotelian storytelling where the story has no before and certainly no superior teller.

The problem would be as follows: how can the camera eye be, at the same time, totally independent from the protagonists and moving as if being an extra guest's look. How the camera can be omniscient and affirmative of her presence and not relate to any superior teller since DOGMA 95 states the film is not the emanation of someone in particular, and that, even if this someone existed he should not have any taste. But in *Festen*, every shot tells very strongly that someone is in charge and that the camera is not only here to follow the actors' performances but also give its own message and view of the story.

It seems obvious: Linda, the dead sister, is in charge of the images. She is the one who knows the entire story, so she knows where to point the camera and she has a very strong will, too. She wants to help her brother to have the truth come out, so she'll do anything in her power to do so, pointing out minor details, not giving any freedom to the viewer. Christian is in charge of the words and he won't let anyone or anything prevent him from talking but he has a very silly

look, almost as if he were blind - because Linda is in charge of the images, of showing everything, even behind closed doors.

The couple being formed again: the words in Christian's mouth and the image in Linda's eye, there is no escape for the viewer, no alternative than to be under their will. The only incoherence in this enunciation's form is that even after the truth came out, after the dream sequence where they are reunited, the camera remains the same, still shaking and inquisitive. The ghost is still here, not resting in peace yet while the living characters seem more restful.

***Festen*, a cultural melting pot**

As we see, *Festen* cuts down the avant-garde that DOGMA 95 could have created to some rational form of enunciation so that the truth can come out and the siblings' couple can finally dictate its rules over the family. Such a strong personal implication in the film, the fact that the audience sees through the eyes of the sister the story the brother is telling, is probably among the factors, which have turned *Festen* into such a big success. Once again, the handheld camera is provocative and avant-garde but used in such a way (reminding of home videos, emanation of Linda) that the viewer can still hang on and get down to the film quite easily

We've already pointed out many of the references *Festen* makes, in terms of cultural stereotypes (the film is very Danish in the way the family is respectful of tradition, but also universal because we all know and have such families), storytelling patterns (the film reminds us of *Hamlet*, *Ceïpe* and so many classical plays) an film aesthetics (commitment to convention). But we would now like to focus on two other aspects of the intertekstuality in *Festen*, its ability to introduce comic and irony in a dark story like this and its ability to mix so many different aesthetics, turning the film into a melting pot of everything we all know and putting it under one and only one dogma: the dogma of globalization.

Between anger, tears and laughs

It was not meant to be a comedy at all. But I think people laugh because of the cruelty of the film. While writing the script we were aware that people open up when they laugh. Since they open up, they are ready to receive another kick in the face. If it's black all the way, within fifteen minutes there will be a fence between the audience and the film. (...) We ourselves felt that we had to lighten it up, not to be superficial but in order for the audience to swallow even more of this very dark story.¹²

And this works. The audience laughs¹³, or at least gives a smile, a sickly smile: it is then a very good strategy for maintaining the audience and create some closeness between the film and its viewer.

Firstly, there are a few goofs in the film such as the German toastmaster with his very strong accent (this probably works best in Denmark), the senile grandfather who always comes back with the very same story, the drunk uncle falling off his chair.

Then, Mikael's character which is comical in its own pathetic way: his race around the house to be on time to meet his father, or his struggling with the door when he wants to lock his brother out could be taken from a slapstick comedy. The way he handles relationships is very touching, because he knows that he does not fit anywhere.

But the strongest use of comic resides in the ironic juxtaposition of a loaded speech and a joke or a sarcastic event. This creates a distance in which the viewer is lost and cannot totally think straight, caught between his shock and his laugh.

The most obvious example would be Christian's comeback after Else's talk. The sequence lasts only 80 seconds¹⁴ but is dramatically fragmented into 20 shots. The cross cut¹⁵ editing focuses on both the grandmother singing and Christian's determination to open the doors. His figure, mostly shown from a low angle, is very impressive and reminds one of a "Schwarzenegger coming back to kill the monster". We can easily picture the hammer in his hand and hear a voice saying: "He is back, and he is not happy". (Pia says such a line in another "coming back" scene.)

When he enters the dining room, the camera gets very agitated, the grandmother stops singing and Christian goes on with his terrible accusations. He is soon stopped again by his brother and uncles who throw him out of the room (the camera is almost one of the aggressors). Helge then asks his mother to keep on singing and here she goes: "There is such an idyll, such peace and calm in the sylvan solitude that all sorrows are stilled where peace and rest to reign" - in a couple of shots.

This dichotomy between those two figures and two situations creates a tremendous irony, the song being a wonderful example of "counterpoint" music¹⁶. A music which gives another view on the story shown, a music which disagrees with the image. This works here even though the music is not on the actual image but just after. Vinterberg makes here a very clever use of the synchronized sound rule and gives an effect, which might not have been possible otherwise.

In this sequence, the viewer is caught between two kinds of violence: Christian's physical one (but shown in a comical way with references to a cinema Vinterberg wants to escape) and the one created by the juxtaposition between the singing and the accusation. This violence can only make the viewer smile, in a way he is not proud of but, facing a classical attraction/repulsion phenomena: he is taken by the film, seduced by it - much more than if everything were dark. This is symptomatic of the entire film, the entire progress. Never choose between two "dogmas" but put in a little bit of both so that anyone can find himself in it. This is the same with film aesthetics.

Between TV, "cinema vérité" and Hollywood aesthetics

The dinner scenes were shot with three cameras, reminding of a live TV coverage where one can find cam-

eras everywhere so that the director can be sure not to miss anything interesting for the audience and have all angles covered, even the most unlikely ones. Soon enough, in a soccer game, we should have the soccer ball's point of view. And that's what happens in *Festen* with the shot from inside the aspirin box for instance. Many times it seems that the shots are made for the shot's sake and not guided by the characters as DOGMA 95 stated.

Vinterberg and Dod Mantle could not free themselves from making aesthetics shots, in which the camera angle and the frame composition is more important than what's happening. We'll take the overdramatized shot of the cars coming towards the mansion at the beginning, at which the camera is almost driven over as an example. This kind of shooting with three cameras was also typical of Hollywood shootings. This happens either when the director does not have the final cut and has to make many extra angles to please the producer in case his editing does not convince him, or when the director is not enough self confident to shoot the scenes under one single angle.

With such a shooting Vinterberg covered himself and could make a very classical Hollywood editing in which cutting on movement (the continuity between two shots is created by the movement of the character who starts his action under one angle and finishes it under another) is more used than jump cuts (rough cuts between two shots). Vinterberg and Oscarsdottir (his editor) have been very good at using every possibility the film offers to create continuity: Christian's asking if his sister has arrived/shot of her in the car, doors closing and opening, a candle being lighted.

The transitions are very smooth between two scenes and this does remind of a classical Hollywood film where there is nothing to hurt the viewer, to make him realize he is watching a film. Within such editing, Vinterberg counters his use of video and handheld camera which could harm the viewer: despite his sayings, he creates an autonomous film world in which the story tells itself without any exterior intervention.

But we have to recognize that when Mikael and Mette are fighting in their room, there is nothing mainstream about it. This almost uncut scene has the spirit of *A Woman under the Influence*, (Cassavetes) and the aesthetic of the "cinema verité" documentaries. In both cases, the main focus is the characters, the camera movements are guided by the characters' actions and nothing else and in this scene, the camera has no other choice than to become hysterical.

This scene is one of the very rare moments, where the cinematographer accepted to loose control and to let the actors be in front of his lens. But when Gbatokai, Helene and the mother meet, the cinematographer cannot prevent himself from doing a circular travelling to embrace the three characters and show all three reactions. Such a strong camera movement should have a strong connotation but we cannot find anything if not to show the cinematographer's virtuosity, give the viewer a headache and try to give a fake feeling of "cinema verité".

The film cannot chose one single aesthetic, it mixes many different kinds of images and even makes references to Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (the farandole), Bunuel's *Exterminator Angel* (the people locked in a house) or, as we said before, the film is filled with cross-overs, creating distance and closeness at the same time, it mixes to a great extent high and low culture.

We finally think that *Festen* is mostly under the dogma of globalization: it cannot choose between DOGMA 95, the Hollywood dogma, the Aristotelian one – and even creates an ultimate one to justify the film enunciation's form: Christian and Linda's dogma.

Taken by so many different wills, the viewer has no way out of the film. He can not do anything but be touched by this breathtaking piece of art because it tells a story we can all relate to and embrace the viewer in it so that he cannot have a distance look upon it but breathes along with Christian and Linda.

The virtuosity of the film was to choose a story, which could profit to such a tremendous extent from a "home movie" style praised by DOGMA 95. We think this was the most effective use of DOGMA 95 (*The Idiots* apart) but also the most illusional. It gave the impression that we could all make a DOGMA 95 film when it takes huge qualities to achieve something like that, in terms of storytelling and in terms of filmmaking. Once again, it was proved that there is no such thing as improvisation and that making art is a work.

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<http://www.dogme95.com> (manifesto, vow of chastity, interviews)

<http://www.lumiere.obs.coe.int> (data base on admissions of films released in Europe)

¹ Interview with Peter Rundle, published on <http://www.dogme95.dk>

² Numbers from *Lumiere*, data base on admissions of films released in Europe. <http://lumiere.obs.coe.int>, anne 4

³ "Something Rotten in the State of Denmark: an interview with Thomas Vinterberg", Richard Porton in *Cineaste*, 1999, Vol. 24 Issue 2/3, p17

⁴ April 2001, 5 exchange students in Aarhus, DK

⁵ Koplevs Krydsfelt, DR P1, March 28th 1996

⁶ Greimas, A.J. *On Meaning*, University of Minnesota Press, Mineapolis, 1987

⁷ Aristotle, *On the art of poetry*, trans. Ingram Bywater. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

⁸ Aristotle, op.cit.

⁹ Barthes, Roland. "analyse structurale des récits" (1966) in Barthes et al., *Poétique des récits*. Paris: Seuil, 1977, pp. 21-22

¹⁰ Group of documentarist film makers, (end of the 50s) who chose to be part of the event they were filming

¹¹ Interview with Thomas Vinterberg published on www.dogme95.dk

¹² Vinterberg in *Cineaste*, op. cit.

¹³ A screening with 4 Danish guys was filled with laughter

¹⁴ From the point where Christian is outside to the one the grand mother starts singing again

¹⁵ Parallel sequence: two events happening at the same time in two different spaces are shown simultaneously and finally meet in a last shot

¹⁶ Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994